



Women
Journalists
Without
Chains



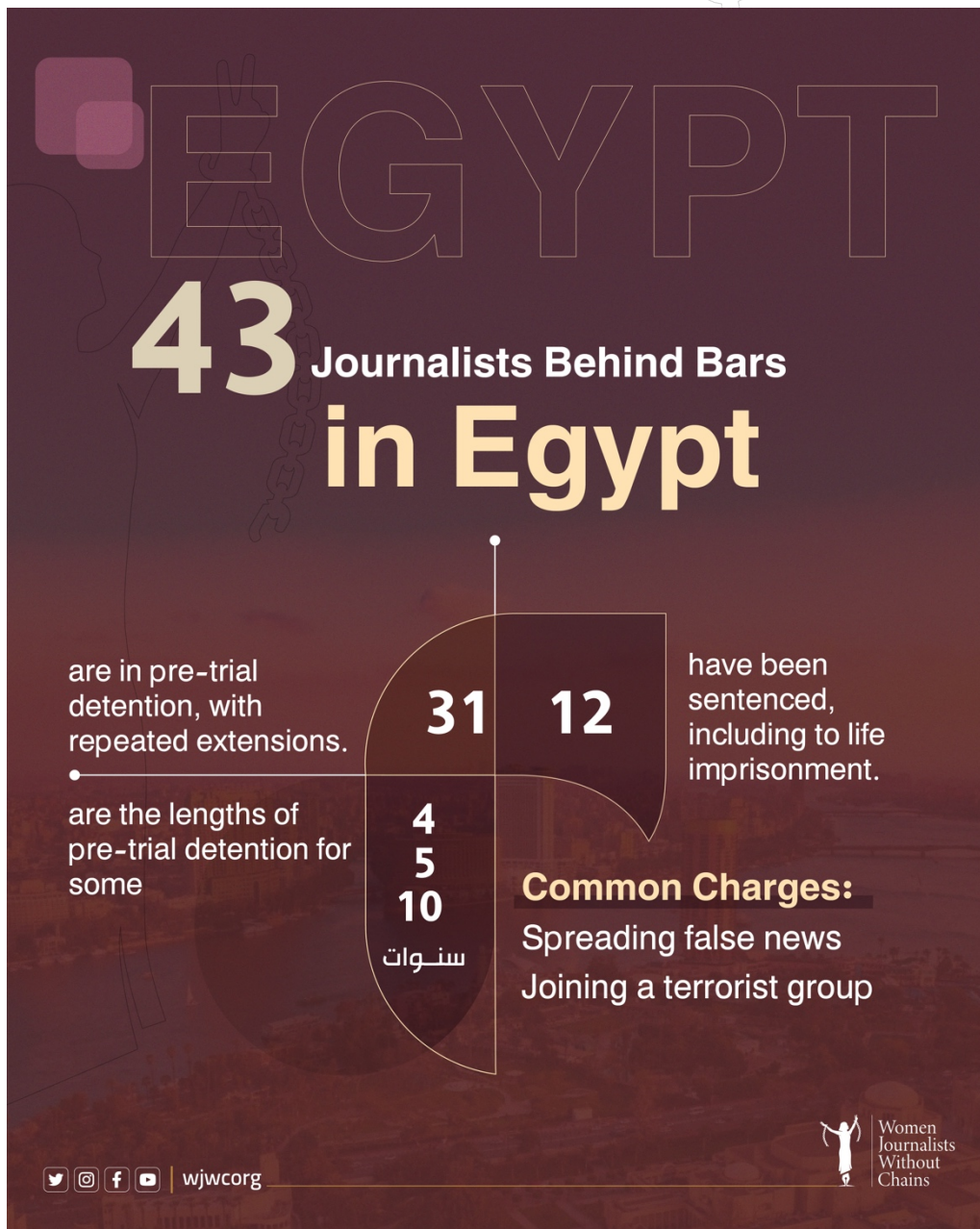
Egypt's Independent Press: Under Siege



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Over the past decade, the independent Egyptian press, renowned in the Middle East and North Africa, has teetered on the brink of extinction. Enduring its most severe conditions in half a century, it grapples with an unparalleled government-led crackdown under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, marking a dark chapter in its history.

Although the Egyptian president has emphasized "political openness and national dialogue," recent weeks have proven challenging for independent journalists, as a fresh security crackdown has commenced, targeting the few remaining voices that dare to speak out on public matters.



Women Journalists Without Chains (WJWC) strongly denounces the escalating Egyptian security operations against independent journalists, as well as the manipulation of judicial bodies to criminalize journalistic activities in a country that holds the disheartening distinction of being the worst in the world for arresting and imprisoning journalists. It is imperative that the authorities promptly and unequivocally release all detained journalists, and put an end to the systematic persecution and intimidation they face.

In a concerning crackdown on press freedoms, Egyptian authorities have recently detained several journalists. On July 22, Ashraf Omar, a journalist and cartoonist working for the Al-Manassa website, was arrested from his residence. Similarly, on July 16, Khaled Mamdouh, a journalist affiliated with Arabi Post, was apprehended from his home.

These journalists were subjected to enforced disappearance, with their whereabouts unknown to their families for a period of two to five days before they were presented to the State Security Prosecution. During this time, their loved ones were left in the dark, unable to establish contact or determine their status. Once brought before the authorities, the journalists were then detained for 15 days pending investigations - a timeframe that is routinely extended upon its expiry, further prolonging their incarceration.

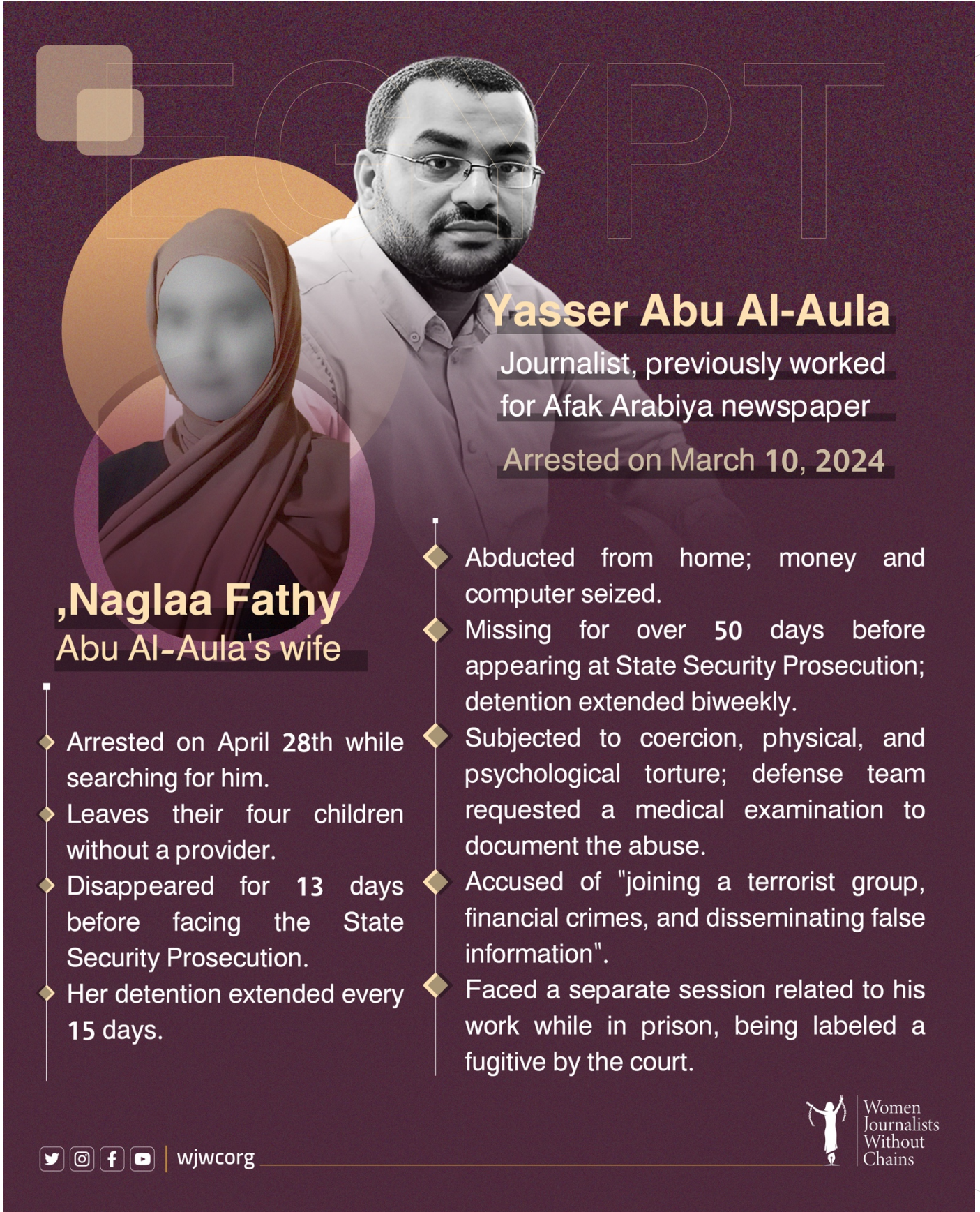
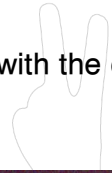
In June, journalist Ramadan Gweida Shehata from the Al-Youm news website resurfaced after being forcibly disappeared for 40 days. Shehata was kidnapped from the Menoufia governorate

on May 1. Since then, his detention has been repeatedly renewed every 15 days by the authorities.

Another concerning case is that of journalist Yasser Abu Al-Aula from the Afaq Arabiya newspaper. Abu Al-Aula was arrested on March 10 from his home. After 50 days of his family searching for him in vain, his wife Naglaa Fathy and her sister Asmaa were also arrested. This left their four children, along with their elderly mother, without a primary breadwinner.

According to Abu Al-Aula's lawyer, no one can currently visit him because his wife and sister-in-law are also being detained. The authorities brought Abu Al-Aula before the prosecution about two months after his initial arrest, and since then his

detention has been repeatedly renewed every 15 days, along with the detention of his wife.



EGYPT


Yasser Abu Al-Aula

Journalist, previously worked for Afak Arabiya newspaper
Arrested on March 10, 2024

,Naglaa Fathy Abu Al-Aula's wife

- ◆ Arrested on April 28th while searching for him.
- ◆ Leaves their four children without a provider.
- ◆ Disappeared for 13 days before facing the State Security Prosecution.
- ◆ Her detention extended every 15 days.
- ◆ Abducted from home; money and computer seized.
- ◆ Missing for over 50 days before appearing at State Security Prosecution; detention extended biweekly.
- ◆ Subjected to coercion, physical, and psychological torture; defense team requested a medical examination to document the abuse.
- ◆ Accused of "joining a terrorist group, financial crimes, and disseminating false information".
- ◆ Faced a separate session related to his work while in prison, being labeled a fugitive by the court.

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Notably, Yahya Hussein Abdel Hadi, a prominent politician and writer, was arrested on July 31 as he was en route to participate in a symposium for a newly emerging political party. Abdel Hadi, known as the founder of the Civil Democratic Movement, had faced arrest previously in 2019, leading to a four-year prison sentence. He was subsequently released in 2022 through a presidential pardon.

"Women Journalists Without Chains" has issued a stark warning, asserting that the recent surge in journalist and public speaker arrests signals the initiation of a calculated security operation aimed at extinguishing the last glimmers of independent journalism in the nation.

The organization stated, "The synchronicity of this security crackdown with the 'National Dialogue' sessions serves to highlight that the Egyptian president is leveraging dialogue as a facade to bolster the reputation of a regime deeply entrenched in human rights transgressions, while driving the independent press towards a state of hopelessness about fulfilling its crucial role."

Back in March, several individuals, including journalists, were detained for participating in an event organized by Egyptian female journalists to protest at the Journalists Syndicate, rallying under the banner "Bread and Salt" in solidarity with the people of Palestine. Following the subsequent wave of harassment and arrests, these activities were abruptly halted.

One Charge and Hundreds of Detainees

The State Security Prosecution has leveled a singular accusation, "spreading false news and joining a terrorist group," against four journalists - Ashraf Omar, Khaled Mamdouh, Yasser Abu Al-Aula, and Ramadan Shehata - as well as politician Yahya Abdel Hadi, in separate cases. Additionally, Abu Al-Aula's wife finds herself confronted with identical charges of funding a terrorist organization alongside her husband.

WJWC has highlighted that the recurrent use of the accusation of "belonging to a banned group" against journalists, politicians, and media professionals underscores the Egyptian authorities' utilization of their "eradication" campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood as a key tactic to stifle any dissenting or critical voices over the past decade.

The Egyptian authorities have consistently resorted to unfounded charges to suppress individuals expressing their viewpoints, aiming to criminalize criticism and instill fear within the country's press, media, and political spheres. This approach has coerced journalists and newspapers into adopting self-censorship practices.

EGYPT

Ashraf Omar

Journalist and cartoonist
at Al-Manassa website

Arrested: July 22, 2024

- ◆ Abducted from his residence, blindfolded, personal belongings confiscated
- ◆ Kept in undisclosed location for 48 hours before brought to State Security Prosecution.
- ◆ Detention renewal every 15 days.
- ◆ Accused of "associating with a terrorist organization, disseminating false information, and misusing social platforms".
- ◆ Interrogated regarding his work as a translator, cartoons, and social media posts.

On July 27, Al-Wafd newspaper prohibited the publication of an article titled "What if the July 1952 Revolution had not occurred?!" authored by Dr. Mustafa Al-Nashar, the head of the Egyptian Philosophical Society. Mustafa Kamel Al-Sayed and Mohammed Ghoneim also faced bans on publishing their viewpoints on Al-Masry Al-Youm and Al-Shorouk websites.

Furthermore, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation summoned the management of independent press websites, including Da Masr website, concerning a news report. At least 43 journalists are currently detained in Egyptian prisons, charged for their journalistic work and freedom of expression. Over half are members of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate.

The Syndicate demands their immediate release, along with all prisoners of conscience in the country. The precise number of these individuals, facing similar charges to journalists, likely exceeds hundreds, with a recent surge in persecution.

On August 1, social media activist Youssef Ibrahim, also known as "Youssef Reeo," was apprehended from a public thoroughfare. In July, the State Security Prosecution extended the detention of "Omar Al-Ansari." Back in February 2024, Mohammed Ali Ahmed was taken into custody from his residence for ridiculing President Sisi on Facebook. Around the same period, Mohammed Atef Eid Farahat was arrested at his home for sharing content on social platforms using the hashtag "Go out on February 16." They were all accused of "joining a terrorist organization, abusing social media, and disseminating false information."

The Egyptian authorities' transgressions against social media bloggers encompass a range of actions, targeting posts or videos wherein citizens reference or critique government approaches to diverse political, economic, and social matters. Many of these instances are categorized as "state security" matters. In July exclusively, the State Security Prosecution scrutinized 303 individuals, predominantly in cases linked to discussing public issues, social media postings, or peaceful gatherings. The Public Prosecution probed 61 people, primarily on allegations of "disseminating false information and affiliating with a terrorist organization," with a majority of cases originating from the Sharqia Governorate Prosecution.

EGYPT

Pre-trial Detention: A Tool for Suppression

Some journalists held in
pre-trial detention for **10.54**
years

Prosecutors can issue
pre-trial detention for
up to **150**
days

handled by terrorism and
state security courts in
Egypt in 2023. **3140**
cases

pre-trial detention renewal
orders reviewed by terrorism
courts in Egypt in 2023. **35.966**

of defendants released
from pre-trial detention in
Egypt in 2023 **0.01%**

individuals investigated by the
State Security Prosecution &
Public Prosecution in Egypt in
July 2024. **364**

Peaceful assembly and
political activism

Freedom of expression and
assembly

Being Interrogated for Journalistic Work

Women Journalists Without Chains states that charges against journalists, often tied to publishing and opinion matters, should not be criminalized under state security. These cases could be handled civilly in specialized courts. The regime's persistence in criminalizing opinions aims to intimidate journalists, activists, and politicians, enforcing censorship and portraying a state versus society battle.



EGYPT

Khaled Mamdouh

Employed at MBC for 19 years,
currently working for Arabi Post

Arrested on

July 16, 2024

- ◆ Taken from home at dawn, his family assaulted, his personal belongings confiscated.
- ◆ Hidden five days before State Security Prosecution; detention extended biweekly.
- ◆ Charged with "terror group ties, spreading false news, and endangering security."
- ◆ Questioned about work at Arabi Post, article content, and pay details.

Before his arrest, Ashraf Omar shared a cartoon portraying a man dressed as a thief offering a map of Egypt to a Gulf national buyer, lambasting the government's intention to sell state assets. During interrogations, his lawyer revealed that authorities focused on Omar's role as a translator, interactions with institutional employees, his cartoon creations, his choice of platform for publication, and the underlying intentions behind his satirical artwork.

According to the Cairo-based Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, a non-governmental organization representing Khaled Mamdouh, the Supreme State Security Prosecution questioned him regarding his media activities, notably his contributions to Arabi Post, the content of his articles, and his remuneration. Despite the absence of evidence against Mamdouh, the prosecution ordered his detention pending trial. Additionally, Ramadan Goweida, a former employee of the Freedom and Justice newspaper affiliated with ex-President Mohamed Morsi's party in 2012, faces charges stemming from his tenure at the publication.

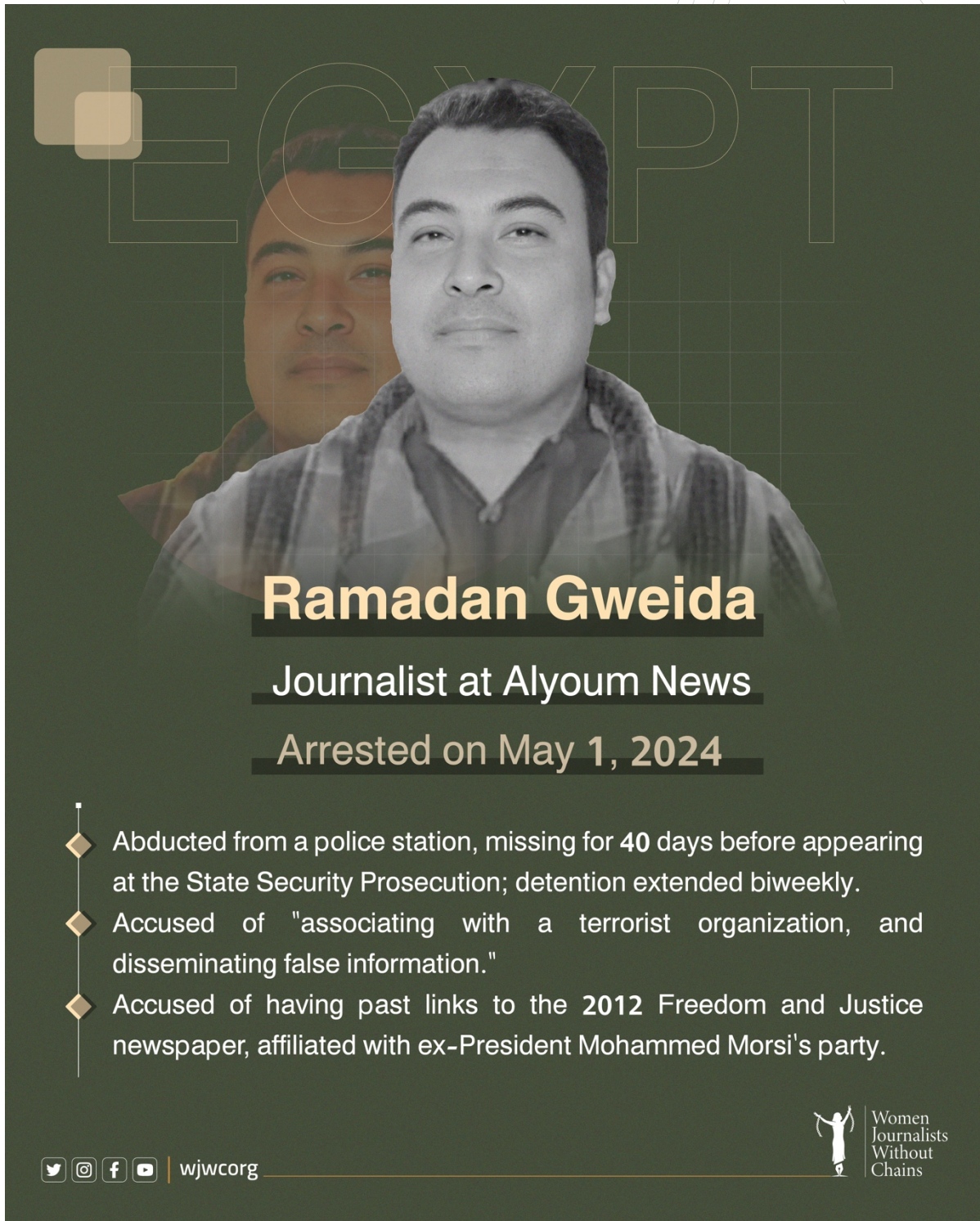
Politician Yahya Hussein Abdel Hadi was questioned regarding an article titled "How long will the army remain silent?" During previous legal proceedings in 2023, he faced accusations of disseminating false information that could incite public unrest and fear with articles such as "When will they speak?", "Shame and dialogue," and "Everyone must be released, including the Brotherhood," shared on his Facebook page.

Youssef Ibrahim underwent similar scrutiny, with investigations centering on his social media posts, as highlighted by his legal counsel. Lawyers representing journalists Yasser Abu Al-Aula, Ramadan Jweida, Ashraf Omar, and Khaled Mamdouh faced repeated obstructions when attempting to attend inquiry sessions. The prosecution has declined to probe the reported enforced disappearances these individuals experienced before their official interrogation. Their families have recounted incidents of torture during their detention in police facilities. Moreover, these journalists are enduring inhumane conditions in cells lacking basic health and hygiene standards, posing a genuine threat to their well-being and jeopardizing their lives.

Since his arrest, Abu Al-Aula has endured solitary confinement, restricted from physical activity and sunlight, and suffering from a herniated disc without medical





care. Initiating a hunger strike on August 10 due to his harsh detention conditions, his health is deteriorating rapidly.


Women Journalists Without Chains strongly denounces the arrests and prolonged detentions of journalists as grave violations of press freedom and expression. They call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, especially journalists, ensuring their physical and mental well-being, along with upholding their legal rights.



Ramadan Gweida
Journalist at Alyoum News
Arrested on May 1, 2024

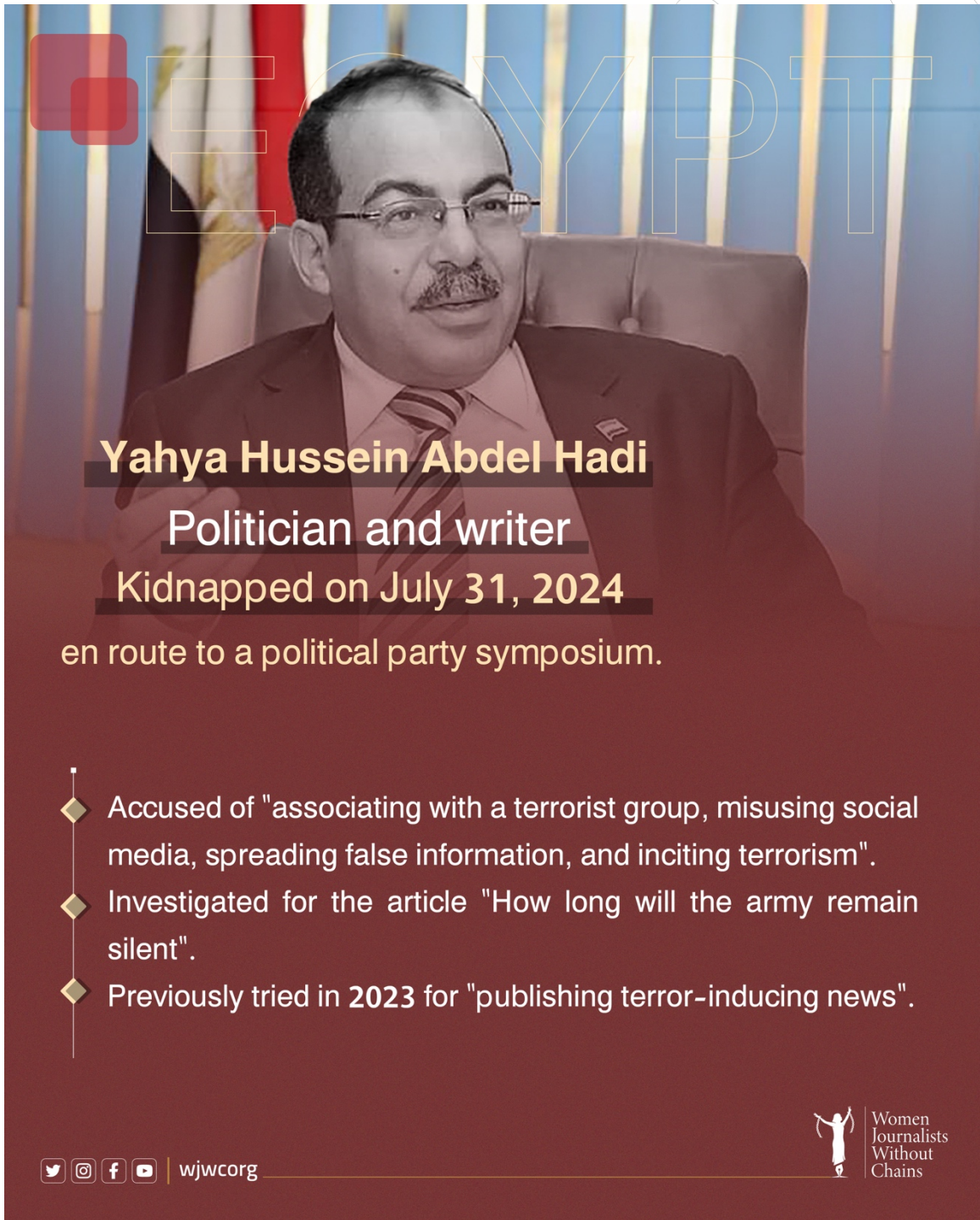
- ◆ Abducted from a police station, missing for 40 days before appearing at the State Security Prosecution; detention extended biweekly.
- ◆ Accused of "associating with a terrorist organization, and disseminating false information."
- ◆ Accused of having past links to the 2012 Freedom and Justice newspaper, affiliated with ex-President Mohammed Morsi's party.

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Misuse of Pretrial Detention


The Egyptian authorities employ pretrial detention as a prolonged form of punishment rather than a preventive measure, with extensions often lasting for months or even years, exceeding the legal limits. Some individuals have been held in pretrial detention for over 4, 5, and even 10 years—a violation of Egyptian legislation and international human rights standards to which Cairo is bound. These laws necessitate pretrial detention as an exceptional measure, not the norm, reserved for specific and essential reasons for the shortest duration possible.




Egypt

Yahya Hussein Abdel Hadi
Politician and writer
Kidnapped on July 31, 2024
en route to a political party symposium.

- ◆ Accused of "associating with a terrorist group, misusing social media, spreading false information, and inciting terrorism".
- ◆ Investigated for the article "How long will the army remain silent".
- ◆ Previously tried in 2023 for "publishing terror-inducing news".

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Among the 43 journalists detained in Egyptian prisons, 31 are held in pretrial detention, while 12 are serving lengthy prison sentences, including some facing life imprisonment. Despite completion of their legal terms, certain journalists are embroiled in fresh cases, indicative of authorities' persistence in incarcerating them. "Journalists Without Chains" highlighted that the Egyptian Criminal Procedure Code, including its amendments, contradicts the nation's constitution and international procedural norms, enabling prosecutors to issue detention orders for up to 150 days and permitting judges to prolong pretrial detention for two years.

In early 2024, the Egyptian Front for Human Rights, an independent human rights organization, reported that terrorism circuits reviewed 35,966 pretrial detention orders in 2023, covering 3,140 cases. Most of these cases were related to the right to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly, and political activity.

Notably, judges upheld the vast majority of these detention orders, with release orders being issued in less than 0.1% of cases, suggesting a lack of due process and fair trial guarantees. Furthermore, Women Journalists Without Chains stated: "The Egyptian authorities must respect human rights and their international obligations, and ensure a safe and free environment for the media to exercise their role without fear of repression or retaliation."

Systematic Policy

The arrests of journalists occurred concurrently with the sessions of the "National Dialogue" initiative, a presidential program instigated by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in April 2022 under the banner "Disagreement does not spoil patriotism." Initiated the subsequent year, the dialogue purportedly serves as a forum for discussions between the opposition and the government on critical matters. In April 2024, Sisi affirmed his commitment to fostering a "state of political openness and reform" that commenced with the inception of the National Dialogue initiative.

The arrest of journalists, politicians, and media activists, coupled with the suppression of the dwindling independent press outlets in the country, presents a stark contrast between the rhetoric of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and his actions. The frequent waves of arrests aimed at journalists have now become a

standard reaction by the authorities to any public event or reporting that scrutinizes the President's governing approach and the treatment of the populace.

WJWC argues that the arrests show that the government's commitment to political openness is superficial. The government is willing to talk about openness, but it is not willing to actually allow criticism, even in the form of satire or commentary. This suggests a lack of genuine commitment to democratic principles and a preference for control over free expression.

"The arrest of journalists under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has become a systematic practice, marking the most severe crackdown on independent media in Egypt in half a century," declared Tawakkol Karman, head of Women Journalists Without Chains and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. "While previous regimes, including that of Hosni Mubarak, may have disrespected independent journalism, they did not engage in the systematic targeting and suppression we see today."

Karman criticized el-Sisi's view of the press as a threat to Egypt's national identity, condemning it as both ludicrous and condemnable. She emphasized that independent journalism serves as a crucial barometer of freedom within both democratic and non-democratic systems, highlighting the absurdity of viewing it as a menace to the nation.

Recommendations for the Egyptian Authorities:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all detained journalists.
- End the current security campaign against independent journalism and recognize its vital role in society.
- Amend pretrial detention procedures to align with international standards.
- Stop linking cases of publication and expression to state security and terrorism charges.
- End the use of the campaign to "eliminate" the Muslim Brotherhood as a justification for suppressing independent journalism.
- Grant licenses to independent news websites and stop investigating journalists for practicing journalism.

Call to Action:

- Local and international civil society organizations and the international community must intervene to pressure the Egyptian regime to end its violations of press freedom.

