

Egypt tortures for the US, so why not on its own account?

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The story of Maajid Nawaz, Ian Nisbet and Reza Pankhurst, the three British Muslims who travelled to Egypt with their families, their detention there, their trial and their release now, almost four years later, encapsulates several elements in the “east-west” or “war on terror” story. Media coverage in the UK has focused on the men’s Britishness and whether the British government did enough to help them. As usual, events outside the western hemisphere are presented as though in a void. So here’s a pencilling in of the local background.

Twenty-six young men were arrested in Cairo and Alexandria on April 1 2002, accused of membership of a banned group. This was not an extraordinary event.

Over the past three decades, such arrests, detentions and kidnappings have become fairly common. People disappear. Friends hunt for them. Usually they are in the State Security Investigation Bureau in Laz Oghli Square in Cairo. They are generally held long enough to extract a confession. Their treatment ranges from insults, threats and beatings to fairly evolved methods of torture. Sometimes the person is not required to confess to anything; they are given a warning and let go.

Sometimes the person dies. Mostly, they are sent to jail to await trial. Once in jail, they are generally not ill-treated, but conditions are basic. There are about 15,000 political detainees in Egyptian jails. Some have been found innocent years ago. Some have never been brought to trial. Some have been there more than a decade. The young men arrested in April 2002 were accused of membership of the banned and avowedly non-violent Islamist group, Egyptian Hizb ut-Tahrir. Among them were the three Britons. They were members of British Hizb ut-Tahrir - a group that is not (yet) illegal.

The defence team for the men consisted of 15 Egyptian lawyers from across the political spectrum; from Muntassir el-Zayyat, eminent legal counsel of the Muslim Brotherhood, to Ahmad Sayf, popular leftwing head of the Legal Aid Centre, who served pro bono along with two lawyers from the Civil Liberties Committee of the bar association.

The case was tried in the state security emergency court, part of the apparatus supporting the emergency laws. These laws were first introduced to Egypt by the

British occupying power during the first world war. They were reinstated, again by the British, for the second world war - and successive governments have used them as an instrument of oppression ever since. The state security emergency courts allow no further legal recourse - their decisions are not open to appeal, except directly to the president. Some are seen as vulnerable to political pressure. The dismantling of the emergency laws is a central demand of the opposition movements, which made their presence felt in the streets and in elections last year.

The evidence seized from the men's homes took a year to examine. It was mainly books and articles, many published by the prestigious al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, by mainstream publishers and by human rights organisations. Submitted to the court were some 200 reports from the Higher Council for Islamic Affairs, the state adjudicator on religious matters on the religious content of the material - all declaring it innocent.

Sayf (who has himself spent time in jail) is convinced that none of the young men did more than discuss and publicise theoretical ideas about alternative forms of government. I attended a summing-up session at court, in June 2003. Here are the impressions I noted down that night: "Reza Pankhurst's Iranian mother and English father are here. There's a lot of sympathy for them as foreigners and parents - their lad caught up in this mess ... What struck me was the difference between the accused and the rest of us: the security, the relatives, even the lawyers looked worn, dusty and frayed. Inside the cage, the young men were collected and dignified ... Mrs Pankhurst said to me: 'I get my strength from him, from Reza' ... The judge, Ahmad Izzat al-Ashmawi, has clearly lost patience with the prosecution. He declared that he will deliver his verdict on December 25.

Everyone believes he will throw the case out."

On December 22, Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmad Maher, paid a highly unpopular visit to Jerusalem. On a visit to the al-Aqsa mosque, shoes and slippers were thrown at him and some of his attackers managed to slap him. The Egyptian media blamed the Palestinian Hizb ut-Tahrir. In Cairo, Judge Ashmawi postponed declaring the verdict for three months. On March 25 2004, he declared the men guilty and handed down sentences ranging from one to five years.

Egypt is an important regional power. It is critical to US and British policy in the region: officially the spreading of democracy. But a real democracy in Egypt may not deliver what people perceive to be US and British aims: to secure strategic and economic interests, push ferocious free-market "reforms" and promote Israel. So the US and Britain support the status quo and its apparatus, while offering patronising lip-service to democracy.

The debate about whether the British government did enough to help its citizens

is disingenuous. Why should Egyptian authorities pay heed to British ones? In Britain, we allow extraordinary rendition flights to stop-over in torture trips. The prime minister calls Guantánamo an “anomaly”. He appoints to the Foreign Office a lawyer who advised Israel to block a UN investigation into Israeli army activities in Jenin. In Egypt, our government tortures - presumably - at the behest of the US. Why not, then, on its own account?

Egypt’s judges are convening on March 17 to demand, yet again, the reinstatement of the judiciary’s independence. Opposition voices have called on citizens to hold a vigil in their support.

The 23 Egyptians and Palestinians arrested and jailed along with Nawaz, Nisbet and Pankhurst are still in detention. They remain, according to their lawyers and to precedent, subject to torture. The young sister of one of the Palestinians is dying in a Jerusalem hospital. Her hope of survival is a bone marrow transplant for which the only candidate is her willing brother. And he doesn’t even have a Tony Blair to not speak up for him.

Human rights cannot be regional. The rule of law cannot be selective.

Guantánamo, Belmarsh, Laz Oghli and Facility 1391 in Israel are part of the same configuration; they stand together or - one hopes - fall together.

By **Ahdaf Soueif**, her latest book is *Mezzaterra, Fragments from the Common Ground*