

Egypt: Women Abused Over Alleged ISIS Ties

Torture, Incommunicado Detention, Flawed Due Process



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A photo published by a pro-army militia Facebook page, Uswod Al-karama, (which was later deleted) showing a group of women and children, whom the group described as the wives and children of men of the Islamic State affiliate, being arrested by the Egyptian army near al-Moqat'a area south of Sheikh Zuwayed in North Sinai, Egypt, October 24, 2022. © 2022 Uswod Al-karama/Facebook

- Egyptian authorities have arbitrarily detained women and girls related to suspected members of the Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate in North Sinai, some for months or years.
- Some were themselves victims of abuses by the ISIS-linked group, including rape and forced marriage, and were detained after they escaped and sought help from the authorities.
- The authorities should free anyone held arbitrarily and prosecute abuses. Egypt partners should urge authorities to end security forces' abuses; the UN should address Egypt's deteriorating rights situation.

(Beirut) – [Egyptian](#) authorities have arbitrarily detained women and girls related to suspected members of the Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate in North Sinai, some for months or years, Human Rights Watch and the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights said today.

The authorities have also tortured several women and girls and held them in prolonged incommunicado detention. The detentions were typically aimed at pressuring male family members suspected of links to the ISIS affiliate Wilayat Sina' (Sinai Province) to turn themselves in, or to obtain information about them, lawyers and witnesses said. Some of these women and girls were themselves victims of abuses by the ISIS-linked group, including rape and forced marriage, and were detained after they escaped and sought help from the authorities.

“Egyptian authorities have been abusing many women and children in North Sinai to extract information about their suspected ISIS affiliate relatives or pressure these suspects to turn themselves in,” said Ahmed Salem, executive director of the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights. “The authorities should immediately free all women and girls held merely for being related to or associated with male suspects, and investigate torture and other ill-treatment against them.”

Since July 2013, Egyptian military [operations have escalated](#) in North Sinai against Wilayat Sina', which pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014. The Egyptian authorities have effectively turned the region into a closed military zone where independent reporting is prohibited. Both the Egyptian military and police and Wilayat Sina' have seriously violated international humanitarian law in ways which may [amount to war crimes](#).

Human Rights Watch and the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights documented 21 cases that took place between 2017 and 2022 involving 19 women and 2 girls. The organizations remotely interviewed relatives of nine of the women and girls, lawyers representing nine other women, two people who were detained with another woman, and two formerly detained women.

Relatives of three women said that National Security Agency (NSA) officers abused them at various agency sites, including with beatings and electric shocks. Two other women said that officers verbally abused the women, slapped one in the face, and blindfolded the other in North Sinai police stations.

Women and girls have been gravely abused by Wilayat Sina' members in their hideouts including with rape and forced marriages, sources said. In some cases, members of the group prevented women and girls from leaving. Yet in all 21 cases documented for this report, the authorities failed to treat the women and girls as possible victims of crimes themselves.

Moreover, relatives and lawyers said, the authorities referred five of the women and one of the girls, all detained in 2019 and 2021, for prosecution after they escaped and sought protection from the authorities. Security forces immediately detained and held the girl and the five women incommunicado without access to lawyers for up to two months and tortured at least one of the women, the sources said.

Prosecutors or judges had ordered three of the six individuals released in 2021 and 2022. To circumvent their release orders, lawyers said, security forces filed new cases against them with the same charges of providing logistical support to or joining a terrorist group. The authorities use this process, known as [rotation](#), to keep people in arbitrary detention despite judicial release orders.

In one example, in 2019, the authorities detained a 15-year-old girl who had undergone three forced marriages since the age of 14, with her first two husbands dying in armed clashes. When she moved from North Sinai to Cairo, the authorities detained her, held her incommunicado for six months, and prosecuted her, her lawyer said.

Security forces detained other women and girls who, according to their relatives, had not lived in Wilayat Sina' hideouts and may never have been to such hideouts, apparently to extract information about their relatives or to retaliate against relatives suspected of joining the local ISIS affiliate.

Since mid-2020, Wilayat Sina' has apparently [lost much](#) of its stronghold in North Sinai. Under the justification of fighting the group [\[BP1\]](#), the Egyptian army and police [have detained](#) thousands of people, many of them arbitrarily during mass arrest campaigns, and held them in isolation.

“Many women and girls in North Sinai have already suffered intolerable abuse at the hands of ISIS-linked members,” said [Adam Coogle](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The Egyptian government should be protecting them, not locking them up and torturing them.”

Background

Women and girls whose treatment Human Rights Watch and the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights documented are identified by pseudonyms for their protection.

Security forces held 12 of the 21 women and girls incommunicado for periods ranging from 2 weeks to 6 months, mostly at National Security Agency facilities in Cairo, North Sinai, and in the neighboring Ismailia governorate, relatives and lawyers said. The sources said that authorities did not respond to family inquiries about the location of 6 of the detained women while forcibly disappearing them. Military officers held 2 of the 12 for up to a week at a Military Intelligence building in North Sinai.

Only 2 of the 21 have received criminal sentences. At least 6 are still detained. The authorities released 3 women after questioning them for less than a day, and but held 5 others without trial for up to 30 months. Lawyers and relatives said that authorities ordered the release of 5 other women in June and July 2021 without trial after months or years, but lawyers could not confirm whether authorities had actually released them.

Failure to Treat Women and Girls Abused by Wilayat Sina' as Victims

Despite the media blackout imposed by the military, several Egyptian rights groups have [documented](#) abuses against women and girls in North Sinai by male members of Wilayat Sina', the local ISIS affiliate. Yet in all 21 cases documented by Human Rights Watch and the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights of women and girls being detained by the Egyptian authorities for alleged Wilayat Sina' family ties, the authorities failed to treat these female detainees as possible victims of crimes themselves.

A relative of 35-year-old “Zainab,” one of the six women who surrendered to security forces, said that at Wilayat Sina' in North Sinai “the only role for women was [being used] for sex ... They were treated as slaves and servants ... A woman would sit in a tent until a man would go into her tent [to have sex], and now they are married.” Seven sources said that many of these women were forced by Wilayat Sina' members to move to the group's hideouts. They included a Sinai-born girl who was 14 when she was forced by her family to marry a Wilayat Sina' member, her lawyer said.

A woman who lived in Wilayat Sina' hideouts in North Sinai for a month and a half in 2017 before she was able to escape had refused her brothers' request to live with them more than once, her lawyer said. But then her youngest son disappeared, and her brother called her and said if she wanted to see her son again, she had to come and live with them.

Another woman, 33, moved with her husband from Cairo to North Sinai in late 2016 after he told her he had been appointed to a government job, her lawyer said. In North Sinai, she found out that he was planning to move to one of the group's hideouts. The lawyer said that she initially refused to go with him, joining him only after he kidnapped their two daughters.

Other groups have also documented this mistreatment. The Egyptian Front for Human Rights, an independent rights group, said in 2021 that it had [documented](#) grave abuses against women and girls by Wilayat Sina' members in the group's hideouts in North Sinai, including forced and child marriages, beatings, and death threats if they tried to escape or refused to bring food to these sites. The group said 15 Bedouin women who authorities charged in Wilayat Sina' cases were married to

members of the armed group without having previously met their husbands or consented to their marriages, and that four of them were children at the time.

These women and girls frequently have no other source of income, and their spouses usually threaten to separate them from their children if they try to leave, the Egyptian Front for Human Rights said. Rather than recognize these women and girls as victims and provide them with rehabilitation services, the Egyptian authorities “arrested them to pressure their husbands from Wilayat Sina’ to surrender themselves.”

Belady an Island for Humanity (Belady), an independent rights group, [documented](#) cases of 106 women and 6 girls from North Sinai who authorities detained between 2018 and 2022 in 24 cases related to, joining, or aiding Wilayat Sina’. Based on interviews with 19 of these women and girls, Belady said that 9 were forcibly married, including the 6 girls, and that 85 percent wanted a divorce. The authorities immediately detained 2 of 6 girls who escaped, but did not offer them rehabilitation services or investigate physical and psychological abuses against them by their families and husbands.

Arbitrary Detention

Human Rights Watch and the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights documented that authorities subjected 8 of the 21 women to what is known in Egypt as [rotation](#), keeping them arbitrarily detained despite judicial release orders by charging them in new cases with the same offenses.

Lawyers and family members said that security forces detained six women after they escaped from husbands who were Wilayat Sina’ members and sought help from the authorities. They also arrested and questioned four of the 21 women at security checkpoints in North Sinai and Ismailia without arrest warrants or legal basis after the officers checked databases that showed the women’s husbands or other family members were Wilayat Sina’ suspects. Authorities arrested 11 others at home, work, or, in two cases, at hospitals in North Sinai and Ismailia.

In 2021, 21-year-old “Hiba,” who was eight months pregnant, escaped a hideout and went to the hospital close to the Suez Canal, her lawyer said. But when she told the medical staff she was married to a Wilayat Sina’ member, they called security authorities who detained and charged her with joining and providing funding and support to a terrorist group. A judge ordered Hiba released in 2021, after 10 months without trial, on condition that she regularly report to the police several times a week, but the lawyers said that security forces never released her.

Two women said that they were held and questioned for a few hours in 2021 about relatives who are wanted or suspected Wilayat Sina’ members, then released. One, who was arrested at her home without being shown a warrant, had been held for 21 days in 2019 to question her about her male relative. The second woman turned herself in after they arbitrarily detained two of her relatives when they could not find her at home.

“When I arrived at the police station, they blindfolded me and questioned me about two relatives whom police said were wanted,” she said. “I kept swearing I don’t know anything about them [but] an officer kept yelling at me. Then policemen asked me to write down on a paper all my personal information and my husband’s and photographed/took a picture of me with the paper before releasing me.” The first woman said that a police officer slapped her in the face and told her, “I want to get promoted like officer [name withheld]. Give me information on your relative or this time you will not be released. We will cut you into pieces for dinner.”

The lawyer for a woman named “Hania” said she was detained while visiting her hospitalized mother-in-law close to Suez Canal in 2021. The lawyer said that Hania has never been to any Wilayat Sina’ hideouts, lost contact with her husband after he joined Wilayat Sina’ several years ago and is not aware of his situation or whether he is alive. She was charged with joining and providing logistical support to a terrorist group. A judge ordered her release in 2022, but the lawyer could not confirm her release.

Police officers arrested “Maymouna” while she was at work as a pharmacist in al-Arish, North Sinai, in 2021. They took her to an undisclosed location in a private car and told her she would be interrogated and quickly released, a family member said. Instead, authorities forcibly disappeared Maymouna for about a month and did not answer her family’s inquiries about her whereabouts.

Authorities later charged her with joining and providing logistical support to a terrorist group. Six months later a judge ordered her released, without trial, but authorities only released her after an additional six months during which they held her incommunicado at a police station in North Sinai.

Police detained “Salma” in 2020 together with her mother at their home in North Sinai after authorities learned that her brother had joined Wilayat Sina’. Her lawyer said she told prosecutors that a police officer in a North Sinai police station told her: “You are hostages here until your brother turns himself in.” Prosecutors kept her and her mother in pretrial detention for more than two years on charges of joining a terrorist group. The authorities released Salma in October 2022, but her mother remains in detention without trial.

In late 2019, officers held one woman for a month at a National Security Agency detention facility near the Suez Canal, in western North Sinai, interrogating her about male Wilayat Sina’ suspects. “Threatening to subject her to electric shocks, an NSA officer would show her pictures of Daesh [ISIS] suspects and ask her about their real names, code names, and whether they are alive or not,” a relative said. “They also blindfolded her in many of these interrogation sessions.”

Similarly, Belady reported that authorities presented no material evidence of wrongdoing against any of the 19 women and girls they had interviewed. Belady found that while the majority of the 112 women and girls they documented faced prolonged, unjustified detention, and some faced physical abuse, military courts acquitted 19 out of 34 in 2022, without investigating abuses against them by Wilayat Sina’ or the authorities.

Detailed Accounts

“Yasmin”

19-year-old Yasmin, from Sinai, received no formal education and was forced by her family in 2018, at age 14, to marry a Wilayat Sina’ member who was 25 years older than she was, her lawyer said. She lived with him at a Wilayat Sina’ hideout in North Sinai until he was killed during armed clashes. Wilayat Sina’ then forced her to marry another man in the group, who was also killed during clashes. She was only 15 when the group forced her to marry a third time. In 2019, the third husband helped her escape to Cairo, where his family lived. At that time, Yasmin was pregnant.

When Yasmin arrived in Cairo, security forces intercepted a call she made to her husband, and located and detained her. The lawyer said Yasmin spent six months in incommunicado detention in an NSA building in Cairo until October 2019, when authorities brought her before prosecutors, who charged her with joining and providing logistical support to a terrorist group. She did not have a lawyer until her second prosecution session, the lawyer said.

Her lawyer said that Yasmin told him that her security agency interrogators beat her and used to electric shocks on several parts of her body even though she was cooperating and answering their questions. She was tortured because her husband was in Wilayat Sina’, he said.

A judge ordered Yasmin’s release in June 2022, but her lawyer said that he has been unable to learn if she was actually released. She was never referred to trial and had been held with adults in a police station in the eastern area of Cairo before her release order, he said.

“Rasha”

Rasha, a 35-year-old North Sinai resident and a mother of several children, was married for about 20 years to a man who joined the Wilayat Sina’ affiliate in 2013 after being recruited by his brother, a relative said. Rasha’s husband asked her to also join the group. She refused, but agreed to go to

his hideout for regular short visits, the relative said. After the husband was killed in armed clashes while she was visiting in 2017, the group tried to force her to marry another Wilayat Sina' member. She sought help from the security forces, but instead they held her for three days at a National Security Agency building in North Sinai before releasing her.

The relative said that in early 2018 Rasha received a phone call from a woman she had met at the Wilayat Sina' hideout, who told her that the militants knew she had returned to her family's place in a North Sinai village, warning her that she should not have left without their permission and that they would come after her and her mother. The relative said that the caller told Rasha her husband had committed to the group that she would not leave if he died.

After that call, Rasha went back to the Wilayat Sina' hideout in 2018, her relative said. In 2021, she was able to escape again. "She never wanted to be there in the first place," the relative said. Rasha sought help along with her children at a security checkpoint in a North Sinai town. Authorities took her and her children to a National Security Agency facility, refusing her request to take the children to her father-in-law.

"For five days she was blindfolded and handcuffed, beaten, and electrocuted in front of her kids," the relative said. "Eventually she started to hallucinate so they had to bring her a doctor, but they did not stop the torture." The relative said that NSA agents would take her children to a nearby room and make them scream to make her think they were being tortured to extract confessions and force her to sign them.

NSA officers released the handcuffs from only one of Rasha's hands when she was breastfeeding her two younger children, the relative said. Rasha and her children stayed at the NSA facility for two weeks, after which authorities transferred her to a police station in North Sinai for prosecution. At the police station, officers gave the children to her father-in-law.

Authorities released Rasha in August 2022 after a military court convicted her and she spent six months in prison.

"Mona"

Mona, a 39-year-old North Sinai resident, is a teacher and mother of four children. A relative said that authorities detained her the first time in May 2021 while she was traveling from North Sinai to Cairo to visit her husband, who has been serving a sentence in Tora prison since the early 2000s following his conviction for a violent crime related to armed extremism.

Security forces at a checkpoint close to the Suez Canal stopped Mona and interrogated her. An hour later, she called her family, telling them that an NSA officer asked her to come with him to the office where she would "run through another security check then be released." Two hours after her call, relatives found that Mona's mobile phone was switched off.

Her family inquired about her in all nearby detention sites, but authorities told them they were not holding her. A month later they learned that she had appeared before prosecutors, who charged her with joining and funding a terrorist group. They learned later that month that security forces had forcibly disappeared her, keeping her in NSA buildings near the Suez Canal, her relative said. The interrogations were mostly about her brothers, who had been killed while fighting with Wilayat Sina' against the Egyptian army in North Sinai in 2017, her lawyer said.

In June 2021, a prosecutor ordered Mona's release, but her family learned through informal channels that she remained held at the same police station in North Sinai. When they went to the station to ask about her whereabouts, a police officer there told them that they had released her and that the police were not "responsible for her escape from the family," the relative added.

In November 2021, the family learned from Mona's lawyer that she had appeared again before prosecutors in a new case in which she was again charged with joining a terrorist group. Her lawyer said that she informed prosecutors during her sessions that security forces held her from June to

November 2021 at an unknown location, where they beat her and subjected her to electric shocks on intimate parts of her body.

In April 2022, a judge ordered Mona's release, without trial, on condition that she regularly report to the authorities, but the authorities continued to detain her until October 2022.

International Legal Obligations

Even in wartime, authorities detaining civilians as security threats have international law obligations to clarify the legal basis for their detention and allow them to challenge the necessity and legality of their detention before a judicial body. The international legal prohibition on torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, including in detention, is absolute. Detention based solely on family ties is a form of collective punishment, which in situations of armed conflict is a war crime. International law allows imposing punishment for crimes only on those responsible for their commission, after a fair process to determine individual guilt.

Children associated with groups like Wilayat Sina' should be treated first and foremost as victims unless credible evidence establishes individual criminal responsibility. In all cases when children are charged with crimes, decisions should be made based on their best interests by a specialized youth justice system. Under the international rights of the child, children should only be detained as an exceptional measure of last resort and for the shortest duration possible.

UN Security Council resolutions, including [Resolution 2396 of 2017](#), emphasize the importance of assisting women and children associated with groups like ISIS who may themselves be victims of terrorism, including through rehabilitation and reintegration. Egypt is required under its international obligations to support survivors of sexual assault, which it should recognize as including marital rape, including specialized support for child survivors.

Recommendations to Egypt and Its Partners

To the Egyptian authorities:

- Ensure any woman or girl identified as connected with the Wilayat Sina' is first screened for potential abuses against them, ensuring that all victims of abuses are provided with assistance, rehabilitation, and reintegration.
- Engage in discussions, involving all relevant authorities, to develop a national strategy for Wilayat Sina' prosecutions and a range of other initiatives, including truth-speaking and reparations, to address Wilayat Sina' crimes.
- Prioritize prosecuting those responsible for the most serious crimes while seeking alternatives to prosecution for those who may have committed minor crimes but were forced into joining or living with Wilayat Sina' members, or who did not harm, plot harm, or commit other grave crimes.
- Establish an independent judicial committee, with sufficient resources, independent experts, and authority to carry out thorough, prompt, and impartial investigations to ensure accountability for torture, enforced disappearances, and other ill-treatment by Egyptian National Security Agency, police, or military officials.
- Direct the Interior Ministry to forbid the detention of anyone inside National Security offices or other facilities other than officially registered police stations and prisons.
- Respect procedural safeguards against arbitrary detention, comply with pretrial detention limits in international human rights law, and adopt alternative measures to pretrial detention.
- Immediately release anyone detained unlawfully or arbitrarily, including women detained simply for being related to members of Wilayat Sina,' and promptly provide effective remedies and reparation for the time spent in unjust detention.
- Develop alternatives to detention and prosecution for children suspected of Wilayat Sina' affiliation, including appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration programs to aid their return to society, in line with international children's rights law and international child justice standards (as detailed for example in the [Neuchâtel Memorandum](#) on Good

Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context) as well as Egypt's Child Law.

To the African Union, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Canada, the European Union, its Member States, the United Kingdom, United States, and all of Egypt's International Partners:

- Urge the Egyptian government to adopt concrete, verifiable measures to end grave security forces' abuses documented in this and previous reports since 2013 and hold perpetrators accountable. Thoroughly review these measures, or the lack thereof, in connection to arms sales and the provision of counterterrorism and other security-related and dual-use items such as surveillance technology as well as security training or assistance.
- Impose targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, against the Egyptian officials responsible for and involved in ongoing abuses including those documented in this report against women and girls.
- The European Union should raise security forces abuses with Egypt in the framework of the EU co-chairmanship of the Global Counterterrorism Forum.
- The African Union's Department for Political Affairs, Peace, and Security, as part of its early warning and conflict prevention mission should place Egypt on its Horizon Scanning briefing on the state of peace and security in Egypt and brief the AU Peace and Security Council periodically about human rights in the country, particularly widespread arbitrary arrests and security forces abuses.
- In lieu of the Commission's 297 Resolution of 2015 on the deteriorating human rights situation in Egypt, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights should adopt a new resolution condemning security forces abuses committed with near-absolute impunity in Egypt. The Special Rapporteur for Egypt should request a country visit to assess the extent to which the government has ACHPR Resolution 297.

To the United Nations:

- The United Nations Human Rights Council should, without further delay, take overdue action to establish an independent international mechanism to monitor and report on the human rights situation, and to investigate grave human rights violations in Egypt, as recommended by [civil society groups](#).
- The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism should press Egypt to end security forces abuses and hold perpetrators accountable.