

PRESIDENT SISI'S PUPPETS



TV presenters used
to wage war on journalism



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JOURNALISTS SMEARED BY COMPLIANT TV PRESENTERS

“Terrorists”, “Iranian spies”, and “sexual deviants” - This is how the pro-government media describe Egyptian journalists who still dare to do their jobs in a country where any criticism of the government is regarded as a crime. While the demonisation of dissidents is not new and is not limited to Egypt, the smear campaigns against journalists have taken on a whole new dimension since General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took over in 2013. The campaigns reached a new peak in 2019 after the intelligence services took control of the media, turning it into a weapon for disinformation and hate speech.

The new leading media protagonists following government orders – mainly TV anchors and hosts – no longer have any qualms about denigrating their colleagues and calling them homeland enemies. They start rumours that are picked up on social media by “electronic brigades,” without any regard for the psychological and material consequences of the victims. Although this phenomenon is still overshadowed by the other forms of intimidation used by the Egyptian security apparatus, such as arbitrary detention, the impact on journalists’ lives is far from negligible.

To better identify and put a stop to practices that impact and hinder independent journalism and pluralism, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has documented the most prominent cases of smear campaigns against journalists since 2013. RSF has also interviewed four Egyptian journalists now living abroad who have been the victims of such campaigns. Analysis of the language repeatedly used, the networks of protagonists involved, the objectives sought, and the results obtained reveal the workings of a machinery which, if not stopped quickly, could end up completely eliminating Egypt’s already dying independent press.

1 | SAD SPECTACLE OF THE SECURITY APPARATUS

STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA

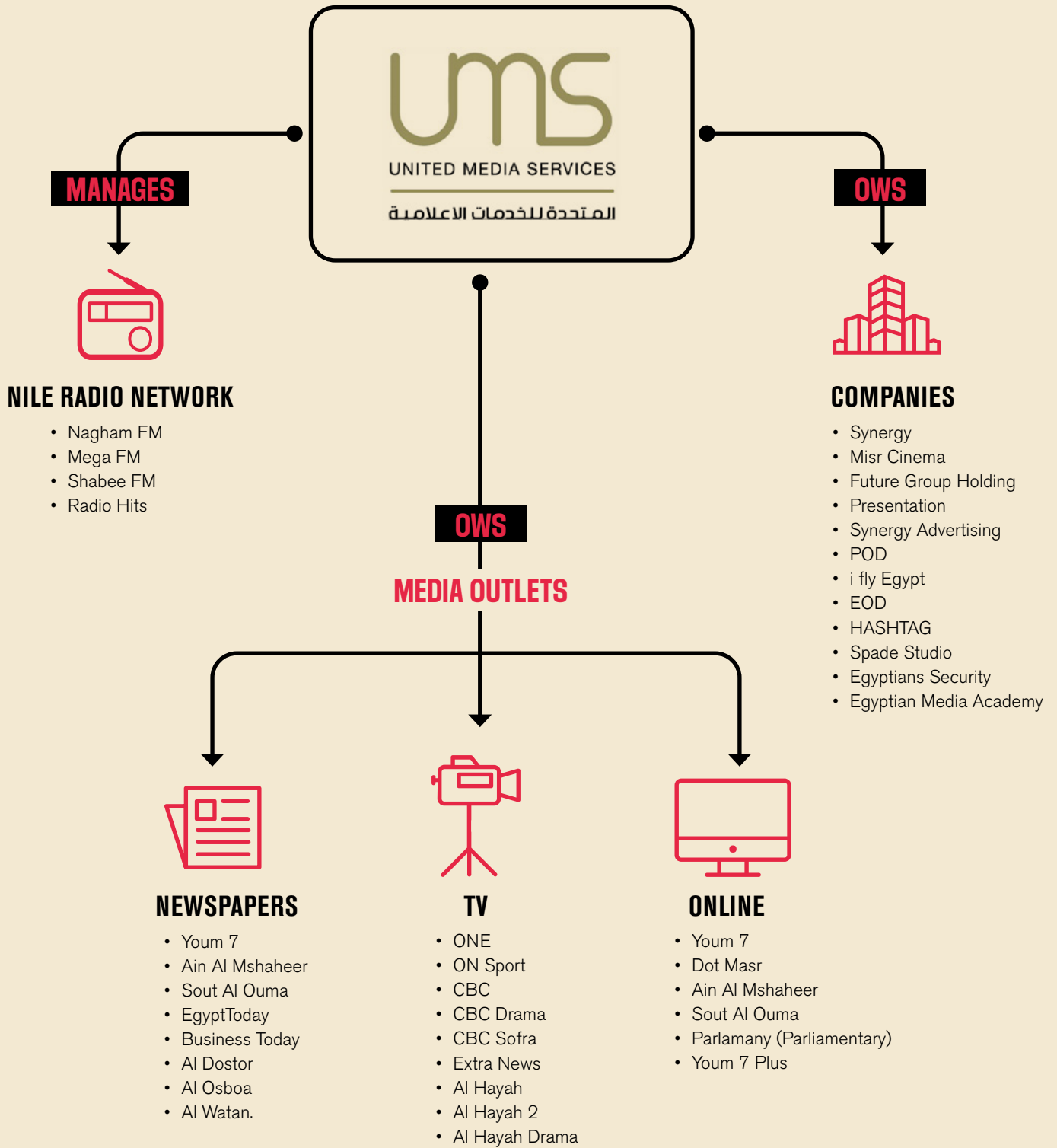
The state has controlled Egypt's media ever since the "Free Officers" seized power in 1952. On 24 May 1956, the print media was nationalised and placed under the authority of the state's single party, and, through the powerful Egyptian Radio and Television Union, the state has maintained a grip on television ever since its introduction in the country in 1960. There was no independent media in Egypt until privately-owned and partisan newspapers were reintroduced under President Anwar Sadat in 1976. The controlled political liberalisation of the media that began under Sadat continued under his successor, Hosni Mubarak. The relaxation of the state's control allowed privately-owned satellite TV channels to emerge in the early 2000s, but the development of privately-owned print media and TV channels remains limited. The state continues to dominate the broadcast media sector, and, according to a 2019 study named [Media Ownership Monitor](#) (MOM) and conducted by RSF, it owns a [third](#) of the media outlets surveyed (see diagram next page).

The Egyptian state's loss of its media ownership monopoly does not mean disengagement. The state and its security apparatus are just deployed differently. [Convinced](#) that the wave of Arab Spring uprisings was made possible by the degree of freedom given to the independent press and privately-owned TV channels, the state



Maspero, le siège de l'Union égyptienne de la radio et de la télévision.
© Flickr/Zeinab Mohamed

UNITED MEDIA SERVICES



wanted to take back direct control of the media. The indirect control in effect until then, consisting of internalised self-censorship by journalists and isolated efforts by media owners close to the president, was now deemed to be insufficient.

Since becoming president, Gen. Sisi has not only tightened his grip on the state media, but he has also been taking control of the privately-owned media. This so-called “sisification” of the media relies on the two main intelligence agencies – the General Intelligence Service (GIS) and the Military Intelligence and Reconnaissance Administration (see diagram next page).

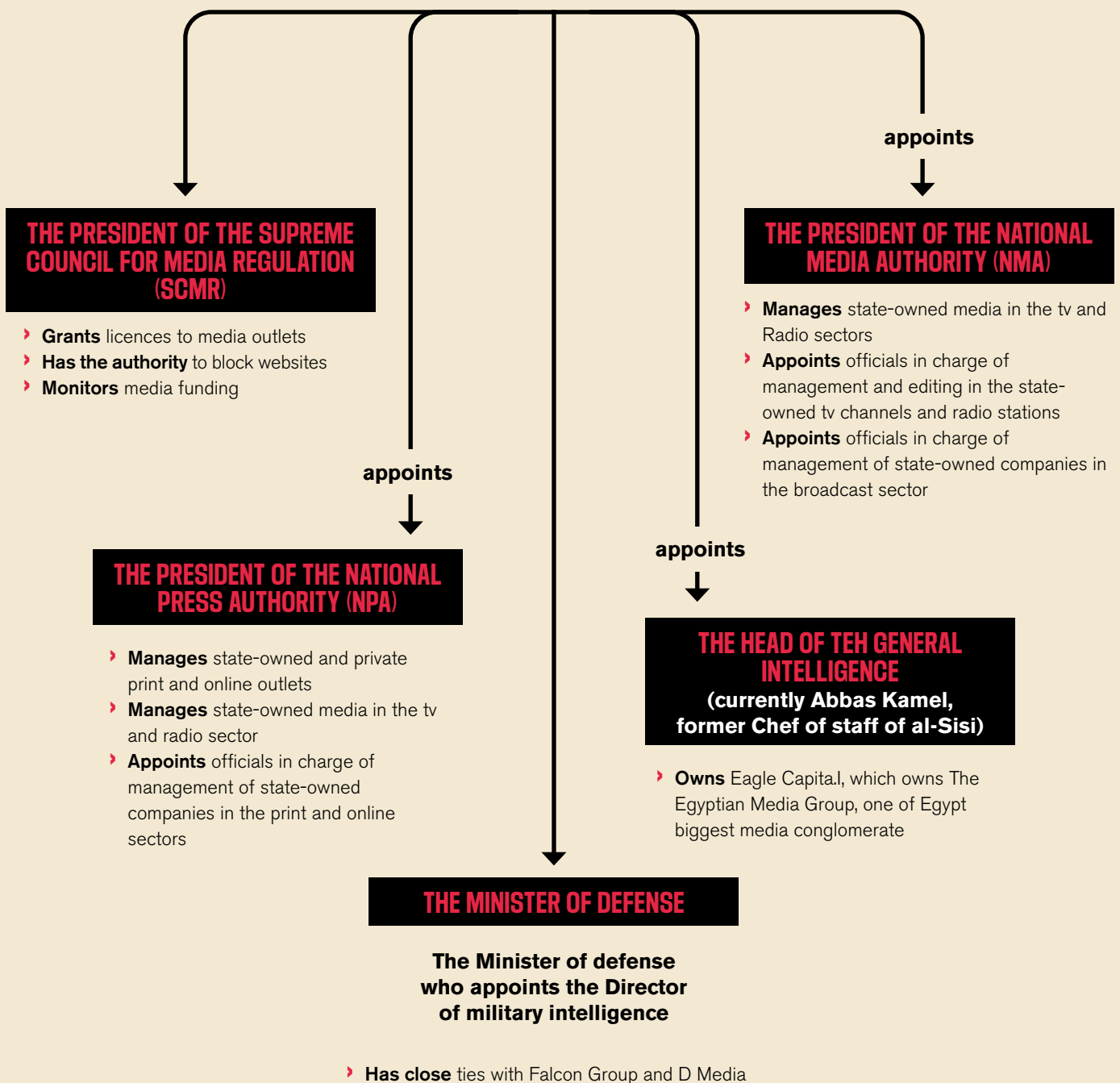
To strengthen its grip, in 2016 the GIS started carrying out a series of forced media acquisitions through its holding company, Eagle Capital, and its media company, Egyptian Media Group. As a result, it quickly became Egypt’s second biggest media owner, owning [17%](#) of the media outlets surveyed by the MOM. The Egyptian Media Group (now United Media Services) owns newspapers (including *El-Watan*), news sites (*Yum7*) and TV channels (*CBC*, *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Nahar* and *ON TV*). The Military Intelligence and Reconnaissance Administration also owns *DMC*, a TV news channel initially intended to be “an Egyptian *Al Jazeera*” until the idea was abandoned because of cost concerns (see diagram page 7).

Most of the remaining media are [owned](#) by businessmen who are close to the president. A single TV channel, *MBC Masr*, is owned by foreigners – Saudi investors.

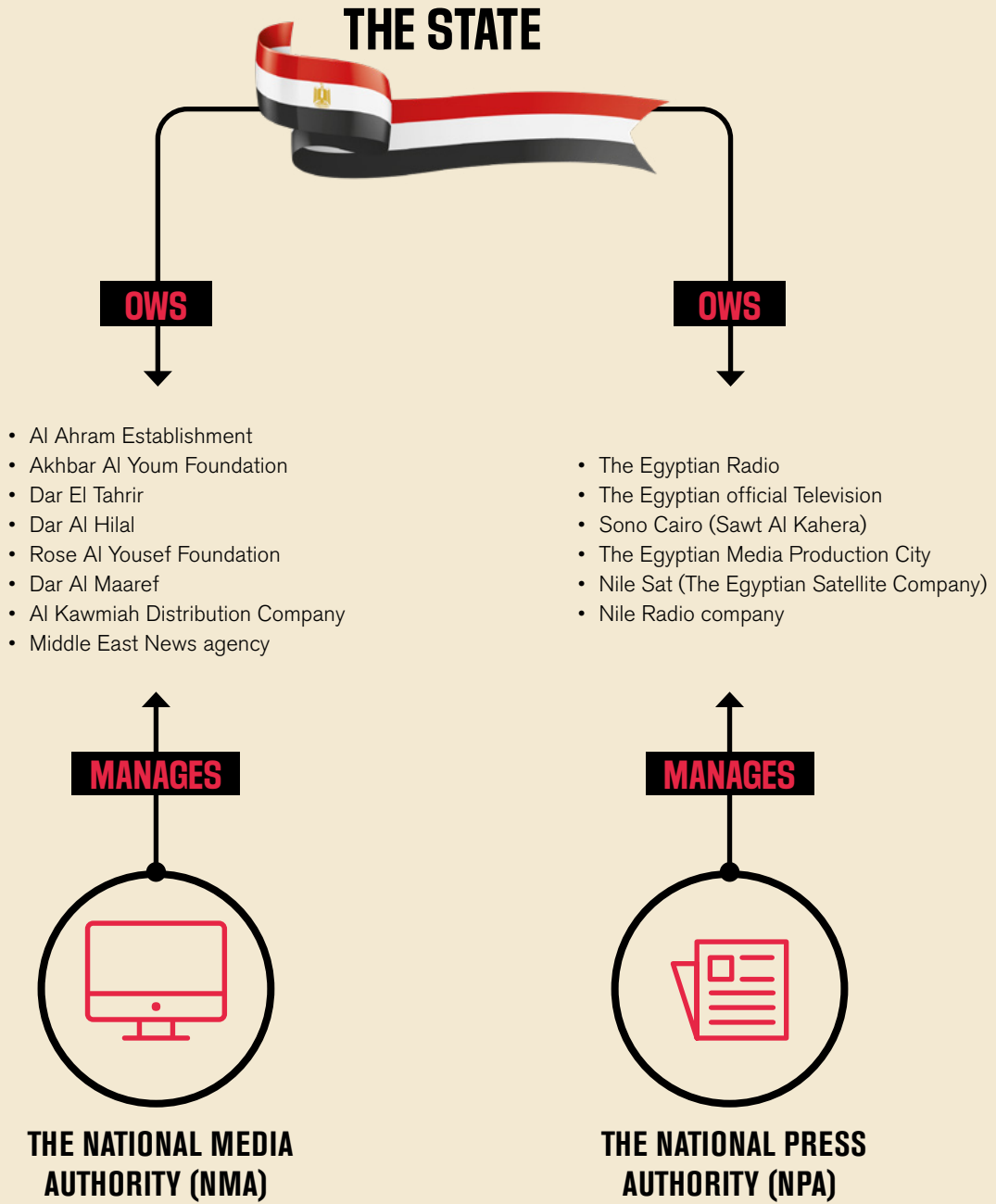
The intelligence agencies have gradually stripped the state-controlled media of all of their independence. [Studies](#) have shown that parallel news teams have been created to provide guidelines to TV presenters and reporters and better dictate the news that is broadcast. The use of the same [42 words](#) by all media outlets to report a former president’s death or a TV news presenter inadvertently ending a broadcast saying “[sent by a Samsung device](#)” highlight a disturbing uniformity. This also confirms that the smear campaigns obey directives from the security agencies, especially the GIS. This allegation is corroborated by the profiles of those involved in these attacks, and the way in which the attacks are orchestrated.

"SISIFICATION" OF THE MEDIA SYSTEM

PRESIDENT ABDEL FATTAH AL-SISI



STATE-OWNED MEDIA



“COMPLIANT TV PRESENTERS” AT THE FOREFRONT

The defamation campaigns are usually fronted by media personalities who – unlike the star TV hosts of the 2000s – are not known for their journalistic skills or a distinguished career but instead have benefitted from close ties with the state’s security apparatus to attain prominent positions within Egyptian media outlets.

Whilst the vast majority of TV presenters used to be the beneficiaries of the economic, social and cultural capital of parents who had worked in journalism, those who today overtly serve the government come from less privileged backgrounds. They readily adopt an anti-elitist discourse designed to influence “the average citizen” and sometimes resort to using colloquial language when attacking their designated targets. Many began their careers at the major state-run newspapers, where they worked as correspondents serving the state before rising through the ranks and moving over to television after the rise of the privately-owned satellite channels in the 2000s.



Les présentateurs Nashaat El-Deehy (au centre) et Mostafa Bakry (à droite) rencontrent le président Abdel Fatah Al-Sissi.
© Présidence de la République d'Égypte



Ahmed Moussa, présentateur de l'émission Ala Masouli.
© Sada Elbalad

Ahmed Moussa is the prime example of TV presenters who use their fame to serve the government’s interests. Originally from Upper Egypt, one of the country’s most marginalised regions, Moussa worked for a long time as an interior ministry reporter for the state-owned daily *Al-Ahram*, where he was [suspected](#) of spying on his colleagues. It was during this time that he is suspected to have developed ties with intelligence officials. Long before Egypt’s January 25 revolution in 2011, Moussa had already been [attacking](#) independent media outlets that dared to criticise police excesses. After the protests that launched the revolution, he was propelled into TV studios, where he had previously only been an occasional guest, and became one of the main counter-revolutionary spokespeople. Since the military takeover in 2013, he has occupied a central place in the media landscape and seems [unmovable](#), despite his lack of professionalism, such as in 2015, when he aired false [video game footage](#) claiming it showed Russian operations against the Islamic State in Syria.

The TV presenters who participate in smear campaigns against journalists usually hold more than one position in the media and political arena, which reinforces their prominence. Nashaat Al-Dihy, for example, is not only the [Executive Director](#) of the *Ten TV* channel, where he hosts a political programme, but he is also a member of the [Supreme Council for Media Regulation](#) (SCMR), a state agency in charge of issuing – or revoking – media licences and that also has the power to block websites and to grant funding to media outlets. Likewise, the presenter Mohamed El-Baz not only hosts a political talk show in the evening on *Al-Nahar TV* (which is owned by a businessman with close ties to the government) but he is also the editor-in-chief and president of the board of *Al-Dostor*, a newspaper owned by United Media Services, the largest conglomerate of Egyptian media, owned by the Eagle Capital holding company, which is now [controlled by the General Intelligence Service](#). As for the journalist Mostafa Bakry, not only is he present on *Sada Elbalad*, a channel owned by Mohamed Abou El Enein, a businessman with close ties to the government, he is also a pro-Sisi [parliamentary representative](#).

It is these very prominent TV presenters with a similar background who generally kick off the smear campaigns, often on the pretext of revealing certain aspects of the life of journalists who find themselves in the government's crosshairs. Once the target has been identified, the state media apparatus attacks it, systematically [using the same language](#) or directly [quoting](#) the TV presenter. For example, *Yout7*, Egypt's most widely used news site, often [reposts](#) videos in which compliant TV presenters lash out at independent journalists.

INFILTRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In addition to the traditional media, the Egyptian state uses social media to attack journalists who cross the more or less implicit red lines. Following the Arab Spring uprisings, social media – “parallel discursive arenas¹” where regime opponents exchange ideas – were subjected to a massive invasion by the state. Today, Egypt maintains an army of trolls with thousands of fake accounts whose role is to defend the government and embellish its image on Facebook and Twitter. These “electronic brigades”, as they are called by their detractors, are also called on to attack journalists who are deemed to be too independent and end up in the state's crosshairs.

Trolls employed by the intelligence services do not just threaten journalists or leave hateful comments, as was the case with *Al-Manassa*'s **Basma Mostafa** and *Al Jazeera*'s **Mohamed Akl**, two journalists interviewed by RSF. They also spread rumours started by “compliant TV presenters” by sharing hashtags, as in the campaigns targeting **Abdelnasser Salama**, the former editor of the daily newspaper *Al-Ahram*, and **Khairy Ramadan**, a host on the *Al Kahera Wal Nas* TV channel (see the details of these cases in parts 3 and 4).

¹ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, in Craig J Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (MIT Press 1992), 123.

2 | GROTESQUE SMEARS

The smear campaigns against Egyptian journalists are part of a larger discourse of the Egyptian state since Gen. Sisi became president. This discourse constantly draws on the regime's founding myth, the often repeated story of how its leaders came to run the country. The July 2013 military coup against President Mohamed Morsi (the first president to be elected after Hosni Mubarak's removal in 2011) is portrayed as a rescue operation supported by the people to save the country from the Muslim Brotherhood's clutches.

Ever since then, this story has continued to be the central theme of all official discourse. It is used as justification for the government's policies, including diplomacy, economic development or even the crackdown on the opposition. The credo: the regime's stability and security represent the battle between good and evil, with, on one side, the state, represented by the people and the army, and on the other terrorist organisations with the Muslim Brotherhood at the forefront.

In his [show](#) on 10 September 2020, pro-government TV presenter Mohamed El-Baz shared his Manichean take on the Egyptian media landscape. On the one hand, independent journalists, described as "enemies of the homeland," carry out psychological attacks to undermine the country's "internal front" and weaken the "link between the army and the people." On the other hand, "patriotic" journalists fight back and prevent the plot from succeeding. In the context of this struggle, all is fair in order to tarnish the image of the journalists who still dare to do their jobs.

JOURNALISTS AS AGENTS OF EVIL



Khaled El-Balshy © AP/Amr Nabil

Ever since the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a "terrorist organisation" in 2013, the pro-government media has systematically associated independent journalists with the "evil force" that continually threatens the homeland and has often even accused them of belonging to the banned Islamist organisation. This is the case with **Khaled El-Balshy**, the Director of the *Daaarb.org* news site and former vice-president of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate. A leading figure in independent journalism in Egypt, El-Balshy has long been a favourite target of state-controlled media. In 2019, when the Egyptian media attacks peaked, he was the target of at least five smear campaigns in the space of three months.

During this period, the pro-government media constantly ran sensationalist headlines, such as:

“*Brotherhood supporter Khaled El-Balshy casts oil on Fitna fire*”

“*El-Balshy flirts with terrorists to conclude shameful marriage... how can Left and Muslim Brotherhood get back together?*”

“*Diabolical figure El-Balshy exploits public's concerns in order to publish fake news about the Egyptian state*”



Cette image de la conférence de l'hôtel Fairmont en juin 2012 a été utilisée pour associer le journaliste Khaled El-Bashy aux Frères musulmans.
© Ikhwan Online [site officiel des Frères], cité dans Ahram Online

To promote the illusion of a bond between the left-leaning journalist and the conservative religious right, many newspapers and websites used a [photo](#) of a conference at Cairo's Fairmont Hotel in June 2012.² By claiming that the conference took place before Mohamed Morsi's victory in the second round of elections and not after it, as was actually the case, these media outlets argued that the support of well-known figures like El-Balshy helped the Muslim Brotherhood be elected.

With his name now associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Khaled El-Balshy could more easily be accused of terrorism and portrayed as a threat to national security, thereby providing grounds for repressive measures against him. State newspaper columnists even went so far as to use religious vocabulary to portray him as the embodiment of evil. Described as a "diabolical character," El-Balshy was accused of "fanning the flames of Fitna" – a historic and religious term for strife within the community of believers.

"ENEMY FUELLING HATRED OF THE ARMY"

TV presenters with close ties to intelligence services have often lobbed accusations of belonging to the "dark side" against star TV presenters who sided with the revolution and voiced distrust of the army during the Arab Spring. They have paid the price for this and, in some cases, have been harassed to the point of having to go into exile.

This was the case with **Yosri Fouda**, a journalist who for many years worked for the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* before returning to Egypt during the revolution. He hosted a political TV programme until 2014, during which time he was often targeted by pro-government TV presenters. He then worked for the German public broadcaster *Deutsche Welle's* Arabic-language TV channel from 2016 to 2018, a time during which he was again attacked by TV presenters, such as [Ahmed Moussa](#) did during his show, *Ala Mas'ouliti*:



Yosri Fouda © Deutsche Welle

“*Yosri Fouda is among those who hate the Egyptian state... those who hate the state and its institutions.*”

“*In 2011, Yosri worked for Al Jazeera. He attacked the armed forces. There is not one time when Yosri Fouda has not attacked the army and its command. He welcomed all those who hate Egypt onto his show. He turned his show into an instrument to attack and incite hatred against the army. This continued for several years until the people began to hate him.*”

² At this historic meeting on the day after Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi's victory in the second round of the elections, revolutionary and Nasserist leaders pledged to back Morsi in the face of what they saw as attempts by the former regime to take back control of the country.



Liliane Daoud © Youtube/ON TV

“THE TREACHEROUS GUEST WHO PLOTS AGAINST EGYPT”

The Lebanese journalist **Liliane Daoud** suffered a similar fate. She worked as a TV presenter for years for the Egyptian channel *ON TV* (now called *ON E*) where she hosted a political programme until April 2016, when she was suddenly fired by management and deported a few hours later on the grounds that her employment contract had expired. It was more likely that she was fired for criticising a maritime border demarcation agreement signed a few weeks earlier, under which two Egyptian-controlled islands in the Red Sea were ceded to Saudi Arabia.

When Daoud, after her expulsion, was hired as the host of a new programme about Egypt on the pan-Arab TV channel *Al Araby*, she again became the target of intermittent hate campaigns. In February 2018, pro-government host Nashaat El-Deehy claimed that she was calling for international intervention in Egypt when she had simply condemned western complacency about the iron hand with which President Sisi ruled the country and the instability that this style of government could cause.

During the time she appeared regularly on *Al Araby*, RSF identified at least three other instances in which Daoud was the target of defamatory campaigns initiated by El-Deehy. In each case, he not only insulted her, but he also gloated over the fact that she had been “chased out of the country like a dog.” Likening Egypt to a mother, he portrayed her as an evil figure who, after being welcomed and nurtured by Egypt, turned against it, committing the equivalent of attempted matricide.

“*Egypt, who sheltered and protected you at a time when you were homeless. She gave you the opportunity to appear on Egypt’s TV screens (...) but you spoke poisonous words.*”

“*No, Liliane, you are not a daughter of this country. You are the daughter of something else. You were driven out of Egypt because you have no values. You don’t deserve to live here among Egyptians. Egypt sheltered you and protected you, but you were like a poisoned knife blade (...) and it was for this reason that you were discarded. Egypt is too honourable and pure for people like you.*”

These narratives presented her not only as a “treacherous guest” who attempted to murder her host, but also as a conspirator allied with other evil forces – namely the Muslim Brotherhood – which were also driven out a few years prior and are now condemned to live abroad.

JOURNALISTS AS MERCENARIES IN THE POCKET OF FOREIGN FORCES

Smear campaigns that do not directly equate journalists with the “forces of evil” can still associate them with these forces by accusing them of receiving foreign funding, or at least claiming that they work for a wide range of foreign forces.

The independent media outlet *Mada Masr* and its editor-in-chief, **Lina Attalah**, have been accused, on TV shows, of publishing articles in English in order to receive foreign funding that can come in different forms:

“*They publish false reports and send them abroad to receive foreign funding [...] I say to the relevant authorities... this award that Lina Attalah received is a type of indirect funding. The Ministry of Solidarity and the government have established regulations for the funding of organisations. Now, these people say to themselves: ‘We are no longer going to send funding. Instead, we’ll give out prizes.’”*

-Nashaat El-Deehy, during the TV show *Bel Warqa Wel Qalm* on 1 June 2020.



Hossam Bahgat © AFP

The pro-government presenter Nashaat El-Deehy has also accused the investigative journalist and human rights defender **Hossam Bahgat** – who he claims is *Mada Masr*’s real owner – of plotting with the West. This accusation has been taken up by his colleague Mohammed El-Baz, who has described Bahgat as “a suspicious person with a network of suspicious international contacts.”

“*He communicates with the Americans. He communicates with the Europeans. He communicates with the US Congress in order to get their support for his cause.”*

-Nashaat El-Deehy, during the TV show *Bel Warqa Wel Qalm* on 26 November 2019.

Similarly, El-Deehy accused *Daaarb.org* website director Khaled El-Balshy of trying to broker the sale of the *Al-Badil* newspaper to people allied with the [Islamic Republic of Iran](#). He claimed El-Balshy received a million dollars in exchange for his role in “this first attempt to infiltrate the Egyptian journalistic milieu.” El-Deehy also accused El-Balshy’s wife, **Nafisa El-Sabagh**, of receiving 40,000 euros a month in foreign funding for her organisation of women journalists.

The crude accusations levelled against journalists sometimes have no relation to the realities of Egypt’s geopolitical position. For example, the state-owned newspaper *Rosa El-Youssef* [accused](#) the independent news site *Mada Masr* of working on behalf of the European Union, although the EU is an ally of Egypt in its “war against terrorism.”

JOURNALISTS AS “PERVERSE” PEOPLE

Sex scandals are another way to attack independent journalists. By portraying them as debauched and perverse, the pro-government media is trying to undermine their authority and suggest that their reporting is biased or that their interpretation of events is tendentious. And by claiming that they are involved in one form of debauchery or another, pro-government journalists seek to win over an audience that is, for the most part, socially conservative and sensitive to such issues.

This strategy was clearly visible in Nashaat El-Deehy’s defamatory [remarks](#) about *Mada Masr* and one of its contributors, the journalist Hossam Bahgat.

“*There is something strange that caught my attention. Something that shocked me and will shock you too, I think. While doing my research, I found a section on the site with events and parties. Look! They throw parties! Social events with, as you can imagine, Satanists. Obviously, I am not familiar with these, but they are that type party. Here is the hero Hossam Bahgat at a dance party.*”

“*This site is owned by Hossam Bahgat and the editor-in-chief is Lina Attalah. Who is Hossam Bahgat? Hossam Bahgat is one of the defenders of deviance³. Hossam Bahgat... yes, he defends them. I don’t accuse anyone without proof. Afterwards, they will come and say to me: ‘It’s an insult.’ No, it’s not insulting. This man stands up for a cause. He has a cause. Hossam Bahgat is a man who defends a cause.*”

-Nashaat El-Deehy, during the TV show *Bel Warqa Wel Qalm* on 26 November 2019.

This reference to the “cause” of the LGBTQIA+ community, which is persecuted in Egypt, is particularly dangerous. Associating Bahgat with the gay community, even if only as a defender of its rights, implicitly helps to portray him as a source of corruption that threatens society’s “virtuous” status quo and exposes him to vilification or worse.

As Egypt is a patriarchal society, the behaviour of female journalists is subject to more rules than that of their male counterparts, which makes them even more vulnerable to allegations of immorality. In 2017, the journalist **Nafisa El-Sabagh** – Khaled El-Balshy’s wife – suddenly found herself being accused by the pro-government print media and news sites of promoting the [consumption of alcohol](#).

A few months later, the journalist and activist **Esraa Abdel Fattah** was the victim of a particularly vicious smear campaign. For a month, the state-controlled media criticised her for not wearing a hijab. On TV channels owned by the intelligence agencies, presenters showed photos of her in a swimsuit. And on their shows, TV presenters claimed to [reveal](#) “the truth about Esraa Abdel Fattah, who wore a hijab before 25 January 2011 and wears a bikini today.” When she was arrested two years later, they again showed the same photos, which had been obtained without her consent, [asking](#) in an ironic tone if this was the “*symbol of youth and social justice*.”

3 The term “deviance” is used in Egypt as a pejorative reference to homosexuality.

3 | JUST ONE VOICE ALLOWED

In his statements, President Sisi no longer hides his intention to silence dissenting voices. Back in 2013, he still discussed, with his staff behind closed doors, the decline of the army's cultural domination and the necessity to rebuild the "state's media branches," but he now doesn't hesitate to [publicly](#) mention President Nasser, of whom he envies the media's unconditional support.

The smear campaigns launched by "compliant TV presenters" and relayed by the entire state media apparatus should therefore be seen as a strategy to legitimise the persecution of journalists who express dissenting opinions, reorient those that do not fully comply with the official narrative, and discredit the few remaining independent media outlets.

LEGITIMISED PERSECUTION

Arrests of journalists often coincide with smear campaigns. Pro-government TV presenters and the media with close ties to the state intervene before or after an arrest to paint an unflattering portrait of the victim. These defamatory campaigns clearly aim to convince the public of the legitimacy of the repressive measures that have been or are about to be taken.



© Facebook : Abdelnasser Salama

The case of former *Al-Ahram* editor **Abdelnasser Salama** is one of the latest examples of such coordination between the state's security and media apparatus. Salama was [arrested](#) on 18 July 2021 after posting scathing criticism of President Sisi over his handling of Egypt's response to the Renaissance Dam being built in Ethiopia⁴. A hate campaign was quickly unleashed in reaction to the article.

On 12 July, the day after the article was published, pro-government TV presenter Nashaat El-Deehy called Salama a "mercenary," a "bastard" and "scum." He also [accused](#) him of spreading lies and said that, because of this, he should be regarded as a threat to national security, expelled from the journalists' union and punished by the authorities. El-Deehy [renewed the attack](#) five days later, accusing him, not only of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, but also of harassing a female journalist. Salama was arrested the following day.

The hate campaign was simultaneously waged on social media. Although the article had initially been received [favourably](#) by Internet users, the favourable comments were quickly drowned in a torrent of abuse from pro-regime Twitter accounts. In view of their support for the president and the army, and the irregularity and synchronisation of their publication, the posts most likely came from the so-called "electronic brigades" employed by the regime. Using a [hashtag](#) accusing Salama of treason, massively shared messages called for him to be put on trial. He also received [death threats](#) until the day of his arrest.

⁴ On the Blue Nile in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. With an installed capacity of 5150 MW, it is expected to be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam.

REINFORCED RED LINES

Contrary to what one might think, “loyalist” journalists are not immune to attacks by the state media apparatus. While a few journalists and TV presenters are privileged partners of the intelligence agencies and therefore enjoy their protection, this is not the case for most journalists working for state media. Many of them began their careers during the liberalisation era initiated under President Hosni Mubarak. They became accustomed to having some room for manoeuvre which, albeit narrow, allowed them to report some of the opposition's criticisms, even if their overall objective was to defend the government.

The takeover of Egypt's media landscape by the security apparatus deprived journalists of this freedom and brought on tensions, which peaked during the political crisis caused by Egypt's decision to cede two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia in April 2016. These tensions continued to resurface regularly until the intelligence agencies succeeded in establishing total domination over the media landscape between 2018 and 2019.

During this time, the state engaged in a wide range of reprisals – from smear campaigns to dismissals and even arrests – to, first of all, restore the red lines that had disappeared during the revolutionary period, and, second of all, to make it clear to “loyalist” journalists that no autonomy would be tolerated.

The smear campaigns initiated by the state media apparatus against its own employees were used to set an example. This phenomenon was particularly visible on TV where “compliant TV presenters” were still a very small minority. The vast majority of star TV presenters had earned their reputations in the 2000s when the emergence of privately-owned satellite channels and the talk show format had allowed them to adopt a certain freedom of expression. That environment had taught them that they could broach certain taboo subjects if they censored themselves enough so as not to cross too many red lines. However, this approach proved to be out of sync with the new media environment in which no leeway in interpreting the interests of the state was given.



Certain TV journalists ended up becoming the targets of some of the most spectacular smear campaigns. The fate of TV presenter **Khairy Ramadan** is one of the most indicative. Ramadan began his career as the host of political programmes on state TV. During the Arab Spring, he defended former President Mubarak and [accused](#) the young revolutionaries of trying to storm the Egyptian TV building with guns and grenades. In 2013, he was one of the media personalities who opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, and he did not hesitate to support the army when it seized power. Like most of his TV colleagues, he encouraged Gen. Sisi, who, in the meantime, had been promoted to the rank of field marshal, to run for president.

From 2015 onwards, Ramadan and other TV presenters stopped demonstrating unconditional support for the new president. It was then that his occasional criticism of the government caused him to become the target of reprisals.

In March 2015, after [defending](#) Amr Khaled, a preacher who was disgraced in 2013 because of his past affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, Ramadan was the target of a hate campaign launched by Mostafa Bakry and Ahmed Moussa, two compliant TV presenters from Upper Egypt working for a channel owned by a businessman with close ties to the president. The day after the broadcast of a programme during which Ramadan not only criticised the media for persecuting the televangelist but also “those who think they are emperors,” Bakry aired a 2014 clip from Ramadan's show in which one of his guests claimed that “50% of women in Upper Egypt cheat on their husbands.”

Both [Bakry](#) and [Moussa](#) then appointed themselves as the defenders of the honour of women, and especially men, in the south of the country. They both aired the same clip, which had not shocked anyone when it was

originally broadcast, and they accused Ramadan of acting irresponsibly and indulgently in giving airtime to this guest and his inappropriate remarks. They also launched [hashtags](#) condemning the incident, which were picked up by outraged social media users. Even though the guest who had made these remarks was the main target of the ensuing social media hate campaign – which went so far as to call for him to be sentenced to death – Ramadan was also accused of sullyng the image and status of Egyptian women, resulting in the suspension of his show for 15 days.

Basma Wahba, a TV presenter who has always defended the state and who is married to a former intelligence officer, was attacked by state-controlled media in December 2019 after posting a [video](#) in which she sarcastically criticised the level of freedom of expression in Egypt. Two days later, she claimed that the video was meant to be an advertisement for her new show and a technique to “make opponents fall into a trap.” But the “trap” clearly did not please the intelligence agencies, which had, in the meantime, launched a smear campaign against her on their news sites.

It is not just the broadcast media that is affected by this phenomenon. **Mofeed Fawzy**, a journalist who had always supported the authorities during his six-decade career, was [attacked](#) by colleagues in both the print media and TV in 2019. Accustomed to a time when the state relied on journalists to censor themselves instead of directly intervening, Fawzy wrote an article criticising the intelligence agencies’ newly acquired stranglehold on the sector. But his attempt to claim the limited margin of freedom he considered necessary to do his job well earned him a strong rebuke.



*Interview télévisée du candidat à l'élection présidentielle Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, sur la chaîne CBC en mai 2014.
© Reuters/Abdallah Dalsh*

DISCREDITED INDEPENDENT MEDIA

In addition to legitimising the persecution of dissenting voices and reprimanding “loyalist” journalists, the state uses its media apparatus to attack media outlets that are still out of its control. The Qatari TV channel *Al Jazeera* and Istanbul-based opposition TV channels affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood were for a long time the Egyptian media’s sworn enemies, until a diplomatic rapprochement was established between Doha and Cairo. The last bulwarks of independent journalism in Egypt, the *Mada Masr* and *Daaarb* news sites, continue to be the

targets of frequent attacks by the media controlled by the intelligence agencies when they publish unflattering articles about the government.

For example, the offices of the *Mada Masr* website were raided and searched a few days after it reported in an article that the president's son would be sent to Moscow as a punishment for mishandling a crisis on 20 September 2019⁵. *Mada Masr* was then subjected to a smear campaign (see part 2 - *Grotesque smears*).

The campaign initially served to legitimise the punitive measures taken against *Mada Masr* (which included arrests), but its duration indicated an additional objective. By attacking the website, the state-controlled media also sought to discredit one of the last reliable sources of news and information in Egypt. *Mada Masr* was portrayed as a [factory of lies](#) whose sole purpose was to supply fake news to opposition TV channels affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. TV presenter Nashaat El-Deehy dedicated a long [defamatory monologue](#) to *Mada Masr* on his show, *Bel Warqa Wel Qalm*, on 26 November 2019:



“ *Mada Masr’s name has often appeared in articles and reports in recent days. It is the main source of fake news for the Muslim Brotherhood. They all say, ‘according to Mada Masr.’ [...] The name of Mada Masr is associated in my ears to the Muslim Brotherhood... A voice from Ikhwan that uses Mada Masr. Al-Jazeera says, ‘according to Mada Masr.’ The BBC says, ‘according to Mada Masr.’ Deutsche Welle says, ‘according to Mada Masr.’ The Muslim Brotherhood says, ‘according to Mada Masr.’ May God curse Mada Masr.*”

“ *You can see the amount of fabrication of rumours and fake news. This is the main source for rotten Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen abroad.*”

⁵ Sporadic protests took place in several major cities on 20 September 2019 after a series of revelations by exiled businessman Mohamed Ali accusing the president and army of corruption and embezzling state funds.

4 | CONSEQUENCES FOR TARGETED JOURNALISTS

It is clear from RSF's interviews with independent journalists that the specific effects of these smear campaigns cannot be easily separated from all the other forms of harassment and retaliation to which they are subjected by the security apparatus. This harassment engenders an overall climate of fear and limits the movements of these journalists and their social interactions, whether they are in Egypt or in exile. Attacks by state-affiliated media and hate campaigns on social media are an aggravating factor that complements other means of pressure. Three of the four smear campaign victims interviewed by RSF were also attacked or imprisoned by the security forces, which forced them to leave Egypt. They were additionally subjected to intimidation via their relatives in Egypt, who were threatened by the security forces. One was even placed on the list of "terrorists," which resulted in his bank accounts being frozen. The harassment also impacts other aspects of their lives in exile since the Egyptian government's refusal to renew their passports imposes significant constraints in terms of their ability to reside in foreign countries and their freedom of movement.

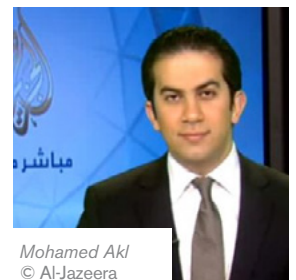
CLIMATE OF FEAR

RSF's interview with former *Al Jazeera* journalist **Emadeldin El-Sayed** illustrated the climate of fear created by the smear campaigns. El-Sayed was attacked by pro-government media after making a film about compulsory military service in Egypt. Asked about this campaign's effect on him, he talked of a "permanent feeling of anxiety" about the validity of his and his family's residence permits, without which they would be sent back to Egypt where they would risk imprisonment.



Emadeldin El-Sayed
© Twitter

Mohamed Akl, an *Al Jazeera* reporter and presenter, told RSF that he thought he had developed a "certain resilience." Present at the mass sit-in in Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square⁶ before it was violently broken-up, he decided to leave Egypt after *Al Jazeera's* Cairo bureau was closed and several of his colleagues were arrested. He subsequently made a [documentary](#) about the changes in the relationship between youth and religion post-2011. Focused on societal issues rather than politics, the film was based on interviews with former Islamist activists living in exile like he was. For some, religion had lost its significance while others had become more radical in their beliefs. He said the smears that followed the documentary's release were fiercer than those which preceded it. He said:



Mohamed Akl
© Al-Jazeera

“*The impact was less significant during the first period [between Sisi's coup in 2013 and the documentary's release in 2019] because the media kept using the same ready-made accusations. After the film's release, the pressure intensified.*”

Here, Akl differentiates the standard accusations of the pro-government media smear campaigns, such as terrorism or espionage, from those levelled against him after the documentary's release. While speaking with women who had stopped wearing hijabs and a young member of the Muslim Brotherhood who had become an atheist, Akl touched on the restructuring of the religiosity of a disappointed youth, traumatised by the revolution. This affront to conservative values earned him [accusations](#) of promoting atheism and encouraging women

⁶ This sit-in by demonstrators protesting Mohamed Morsi's July 2013 ouster as president was dispersed by Egyptian police and soldiers firing live rounds on 14 August 2013. More than 1,150 people were killed, according to Human Rights Watch.

to remove their hijabs. He nonetheless insisted that his sensitivity to defamatory and hateful comments has diminished over time:

“ I was very affected by these campaigns at the beginning, but less so now. The campaigns have decreased in intensity, and I have developed more resilience. At first, I wanted to stop [working] because I feared for my life, but now I want to do ten documentaries!”

Basma Mostafa, an investigative journalist who has worked for such news websites as *Masrawy* and *Al-Manassa*, also reported becoming, over time, less sensitive about the smear campaigns. The first time she was targeted was after writing an investigative story about Italian student Giulio Regeni’s murder in 2016. It was quickly taken down by *Masrawy*, the news site for which she was working and which had been acquired by Egyptian Media Group. The website’s executives subsequently published defamatory posts about her on social media. Since then, she has often been targeted by the intelligence agencies’ “electronic brigades,” who leave hate messages in the comments section of her stories and send her threats. Nonetheless, she says it was the first smear campaign that “affected and hurt her the most.”

SOCIAL STIGMATISATION

The accounts of the journalists interviewed indicate that the smear campaigns have, in one way or another, resulted in social stigmatisation. Emadeldin El-Sayed and **Abdel Rahman Ayyash**, a former blogger, fixer and journalist for *Huffpost Arabic*, both lament the loss of many of their contacts in Egypt.

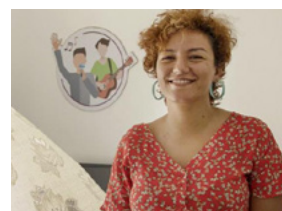


Abdelrahman Ayyash © Alaraby TV

Mohamed Akl explains that while he was not stigmatised by relatives or close friends, some people in his wider circle of acquaintances believed what was said about him in the smear campaigns:

“ Within my family and among my friends, people know me very well [and they did not believe the accusations]. In wider circles, I had problems. Some colleagues accused me of promoting atheism. People said that this person [meaning me] was promoting such and such ideas. In my village⁷... people who had already accused me of treason took the opportunity to keep denigrating me because this accusation [of promoting atheism] is much more shocking.”

Basma Mostafa feels stigmatised, even by friends and those close to her, not because they believe the accusations spread by the intelligence agency trolls but because they interpret them as signs of the state’s displeasure with her. These people are cautious and distant towards her because they fear they could suffer reprisals.



Basma Mostafa
© AP/Nariman El-Mofty

“ Nobody cut off all ties with me, but people very dear to me asked me not to post photos showing them with me because they often return to Egypt. It hurt me at first, but in the end I understood.”

⁷ A poster with Mohamed Akl’s photo describing him as a terrorist was put up in his village. But he says the vast majority of the village’s inhabitants were outraged by the poster and quickly removed it.

The journalist **Esraa Abdel Fattah** was even stigmatised within her own family. According to sources contacted by RSF, members of her family accused her of having sullied their honour. After pro-government media disseminated pictures of her in a swimsuit, she lost contact with many of her relatives, mostly men.

CHALLENGES TO WORKING

While some journalists, such as Emadeldin El-Sayed, have benefitted internationally from the attention resulting from these campaigns, most complain of having become *persona non grata* and of no longer being able to find work. Several media outlets refused to work with Esraa Abdel Fattah after being subjected to smears in 2017. The same is true for Basma Mostafa, who was de facto banned from working for two years – in 2016 and 2017.

Journalists who are victims of smear campaigns also sometimes have problems getting news sources to work with them because the sources fear the impact on their reputation. This was reported by both Basma Mostafa and Mohamed Akl. The latter said:

“ I wanted to make a documentary about the Copts, but I found that 90% of young people were afraid to talk to me. It was because of my affiliation with Al Jazeera, the media’s reaction to my last film, and the subject matter of this one. Sometimes, I contacted them through an intermediary and they agreed to work with me. And then later, when I talked to them, they would change their minds. This made me consider not making documentaries in Egypt anymore.”

5 | APPEAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS |

A HEALTHIER MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND A MORE VIABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR JOURNALISTS WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS.

As this report has shown, the Egyptian authorities own the media and control it with varying degrees. Independent journalism must be allowed to exist, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) should start by unblocking access to the websites of the few independent media outlets. As long as the SCMR continues to report directly to the government (via the Ministry of Information), it will never be able to claim that it is fulfilling its regulatory role correctly, and it will continue to be a tool of censorship that is fully aligned with the government's discourse and policies.

The very concept of journalism is flawed in Egypt because journalists are required to use the state's official version of events when covering acts of terrorism. The 2015 terrorism law prohibits them from contradicting the government's version of events. And, in practice, this requirement is not limited to terrorism: any criticism is at risk of being penalised on national security grounds. Journalists can be imprisoned for "belonging to a terrorist group" and "spreading false information," and websites can be blocked on the same grounds if they fail to strictly adhere to the state's official version.

This environment encourages the emergence and dominance of journalists who repeat the party line without questioning it. They occupy a privileged place in the media landscape, they have a large audience, and they are swiftly promoted to senior positions. Instead of providing information, their work consists in using media channels to repeat what the government says. It is what French journalist Serge Halimi calls "reverence journalism" in his book *The New Watchdogs*. It is the duty of these TV presenters to examine their own consciences and consider the importance they place on journalistic ethics in their daily work. The code of professional conduct requires that they check their facts before disseminating the news, avoid collusion and conflicts of

interest with government officials and treat their colleagues fairly and with respect.

Finally, defamed journalists should be granted protection under the law. The authorities apply a double standard in which the law on "spreading false information" is extremely vague and used solely to imprison journalists critical of the government, while independent journalists enjoy no legal protection when they are publicly smeared and defamed.

An environment that is so hostile to independent and critical journalists influences public opinion, which is then more likely to be in favour of repressive measures, such as arrest and prosecution. The lack of media independence and journalistic ethics therefore directly favours the persecution of outspoken journalists.

As a result, the right to news and information in Egypt has been reduced to the bare minimum in a flagrant and systematic contradiction to Egypt's international obligations and the Egyptian constitution. RSF calls on the Egyptian authorities to comply with their international obligations and, as such, to:

- › **Release the 24 journalists** currently detained arbitrarily in Egypt, especially the 10 journalists named in a [decision](#) issued in May 2021 by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention confirming that their detention was arbitrary. The 24 journalists are listed in an appendix to this report.
- › **Guarantee the safety** of journalists and, to this end, put a stop to verbal attacks and intimidation by government officials, to online defamation and smear campaigns (in particular those of trolls paid by the authorities) and to arrests and prosecutions of journalists for the sole reason that they are practicing their profession freely and independently.

- › **Respect the independence** of journalists and, to this end, stop using compliant journalists as the mouthpieces and instruments of hate and smear campaigns against independent journalists.
- › **Respect journalistic freedom** and, in particular, amend the 2015 terrorism law, which requires journalists to use the state's official version of events when covering acts of terrorism and makes it possible for journalists whose reporting does not conform strictly to the official version to be charged, on national security grounds, with "belonging to a terrorist group" or "spreading false information," and to block news websites on the same grounds.
- › **Stop censoring** independent news websites and, in particular, repeal Section 7 of Law No. 175/2018 on combatting online crime, whose very vague provisions have been used to arbitrarily block many news sites.
- › **End the Ministry of Information's** oversight of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation; make the SCMR independent and respect that independence; ensure that the SCMR's power to restrict freedom of expression and of the press (by such means as administrative sanctions or website blocking) is subject to the strict limitations established by international standards; and broaden the possibility of legal appeals against SCMR decisions, including on the grounds of abuse of authority.
- › **Strip the SCMR** of its power to determine the code of journalistic ethics and to punish failure to respect that code. This role can only be taken on by an independent body composed of journalists.
- › **End the state's stranglehold** on the media, guarantee its independence (including that of state-owned media outlets) and limit ownership of media outlets by the state or by companies or individuals with ties to the government or intelligence agencies.
- › **Guarantee judicial independence** in order for:
 - lawsuits to be successfully brought against those who smear and defame independent journalists or journalists critical of the authorities;
 - the charge of "disseminating false information" to no longer be used to persecute journalists for the sole reason that they practice journalism freely and independently.

APPENDIX LIST OF JOURNALISTS ARBITRARILY DETAINED IN EGYPT AS OF 15 FEBRUARY 2022

An asterisk indicates a journalist whose detention was deemed to be arbitrary by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in May 2021 in response to a complaint by RSF in April 2020.

ABDEL RAHMAN SHAHEEN

FJ Portal correspondent

Detained since 9 April 2014

ISMAIL ALEXANDRANI

Independent journalist and researcher

Detained since 29 November 2015

BADR MOHAMED BADR*

Al-Osra Al-Arabiya editor-in-chief

Detained since 30 March 2017

ALIA AWAD

Rassd News Network photojournalist

Detained since 23 October 2017

MOHAMED SAID FAHMY

Independent journalist

Detained since 31 May 2018

Anonymous journalist

(his family does not want him to be identified)

Detained since 1 June 2019

HISHAM FOUAD*

Independent journalist

Detained since 25 June 2019

HOSSAM MOANIS*

Al-Karama reporter

Detained since 25 June 2019

HISHAM ABDEL AZIZ GHARIB

Al Jazeera journalist

Detained since 20 June 2019

MOHAMED IBRAHIM (AKA "MOHAMED OXYGEN")*

Blogger - *Oxygen Masr*

Detained since 20 September 2019

SAYED ABDELLAH

Independent journalist

Detained since 21 September 2019

ALAA ABDEL FATTAH

Blogger

Detained since 29 September 2019

MOSTAFA ALKHATEEB

Associated Press (AP) journalist

Detained since 13 October 2019

BAHAA EL-DIN IBRAHIM

Former *Al Jazeera Mubasher* producer

Detained since 22 February 2020

KHALED HELMI GHONEIM

Masr Alhayah TV presenter

Detained since 12 April 2020

AHMED ALLAM

Independent journalist

Detained since 27 April 2020

HANY GRISHA

Superkoora editorial director

Detained since 26 August 2020

AHMED EL-NAGDY

Al Jazeera Mubasher journalist

Detained since 22 September 2020

AMER ABDEL MONEIM

Al-Shaab editor-in-chief

Detained since 18 December 2020

HAMDY AL-ZAEEM

Independent photojournalist

Detained since 4 January 2021

AHMED ABU ZEID AL-TANOUBI

Al-Tareeq journalist

Detained since 3 February 2021

TAWFIK GHANEM

Former Anadolu news agency bureau chief

Detained since 21 May 2021

ABDELNASSER SALAMA

Al-Ahram former editor

Detained since 18 July 2021

RABIE EL-SHEIKH

Al Jazeera Mubasher journalist

Detained since 1 August 2021

Secrétaire général : **Christophe Deloire**
Rédactrice en chef : **Catherine Monnet**
Auteur : **Bureau Moyen-Orient, RSF**
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