**Welcome to Hell:**

**Human Rights Abuses Inside Scorpion Prison**

**Policy Brief Addressed to the Egyptian State Commissioners Committee**

**Written by Samantha Cotter**

**Executive Summary:**

Staff in Scorpion Prison are beating prisoners, overcrowding cells, cutting them off from families and lawyers, and denying them medical treatment. Torture through the use of electricity, police dogs, batons and tear gas has become a daily activity in Scorpion. Many politicians are happy ignoring the issue but with the negligent deaths of 6 inmates, and many more expected, the issue can no longer be ignored. Remodeling Egypt’s current prison system to mirror that of Nordic countries is one part of the solution. The second part of the solution is the establishment of laws that will allow detainees fundamental rights. Egypt is unable to move forward claiming to be improving if they aren’t allowing all of their citizens, even those incarcerated, basic human rights.  **Overview: Human Rights Abuses**

Egypt’s Scorpion Prison is the site to a variety of human rights abuses occurring to political detainees.[[1]](#endnote-1) The general population of Scorpion Prison is political detainees among whom are Islamists, April 6 leaders, lawyers, and political activists.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In July of 2013 Mohamaed Morsi, the freely elected president of Egypt and a high-ranking Muslim Brotherhood Member, was overthrown by then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.[[3]](#endnote-3) After the appointment of Magdy Abd al-Ghaffar as interior minister the prison was locked down and searched for three days in order to confiscate blankets, medications, food, and anything the guards deemed unnecessary. Following the search political detainees began to be abused, some beaten to the point of death.

Scorpion Prison has since become notorious for their use of torture on political detainees. Various methods of torture include solitary confinement, abuse, denied access to food, drink, water, hygiene products and a place to sleep.[[4]](#endnote-4) There is also what has become known as the starvation ban, in which political detainees are being held in basic cells without beds or basic hygiene items while being denied food. The small amount of food inmates are occasionally given must be eaten with their hands out of a bag placed on the ground. Additionally, prison guards and administrators spontaneously break into cells to assault and torture inmates with police dogs, batons, electricity, and tear gas.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Additional abuses include denied rights to medication, medical staff, lawyers, and family members. The prison has turned into a petri dish for diseases because the water is being turned off all day until 10 pm when a limited amount is allowed to be accessed. The amount of water allowed to be accessed is nowhere near compatible for the number of detainees there are so the majority of prisoners, who are unable to bathe, are forced to rub themselves with dirt. Even the very few number of detainees who are allowed to bathe are not given soap or any form of hygiene products. As a direct result of these hygiene practices diseases are spreading at an alarming rate. Additionally, chronic diseases are going untreated and spreading because prisoners are denied all forms of treatment including necessary surgery. Dozens of prisoners were approved for urgent surgical operations by the prosecutor but the prison administration has refused to allow the detainees to be transferred. These actions taken by the prison administration are a death sentence for the dozens of detainees who need these surgeries to survive.

So far there are at least six documented cases of inmates dying in custody due to human rights abuses, such as torture and medical neglect.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the case of inmate Essam Derbala, a high-ranking member of the Islamic Group, his death was due to being denied access to his diabetes medication despite orders from a judge and prosecutor allowing it.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hours before his death Derbala was reportedly semi-conscious, shaking and unable to control his urination.[[8]](#endnote-8) This unnecessary death, along with the others, was a direct result of an abuse of power.  **Proposed Solution: Rehabilitative Prison System and Legal Rights**

In order to address the human rights abuses of Scorpion Prison, I propose a three-part solution. The first part deals with redoing the framework of Egypt’s current prison system in order to incorporate techniques that have been useful in Nordic prison systems. The second portion of my plan would involve changing and creating laws in order to protect the rights of prisoners. Creating a commission to look at all complaints and reports about possible abuses is the final portion of the solution.

First off, I propose a reorganization of the Egyptian prison system to focus on the rehabilitation of prisoners. Egypt needs to create a new framework for the role of prison workers. Nordic countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland have all had success in lowering prisoner return rates through two main practices. First off, ending all forms of human rights abuse is key. Torture including beatings, starvation, denying medical treatment, and overcrowding cells needs to be stopped. Enabling this treatment establishes that detainees are something other than humans with rights and the possibility for rehabilitation. Secondly, in Nordic Systems each prisoner has a “contact officer” who monitors and helps advance the prisoner's progress towards reentry into society. This practice has been introduced to help officers avoid serving a purely punitive function and allows them the opportunity to have a positive impact on the inmates. Overall, these have all been successful in homogeneous countries, such as Nordic ones, that are similar to the homogeneous population of Egypt. With 99.6% of the population considered apart of the Egyptian ethnic group, the country is considered to be an ethnically homogenous country.[[9]](#endnote-9) This majoritively homogeneous inhabitants is similar to the 79.9% homogeneity that can be found in the Nordic country of Sweden.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the end, these practices would be found successful in avoiding recidivism and allowing for the rehabilitation of detainees.

Second, Egyptian citizens and political detainees require the amendment or ratification of several laws in order to ensure their rights from being tortured.[[11]](#endnote-11) Amendment of Egyptian law should begin with Article 126 of the Egyptian Penal Code to bring it to the standards of the United Nations Convention Against Torture.[[12]](#endnote-12) Additionally, Egypt needs to ratify the International Convention against torture of all forms. The Egyptian Penal Code should have an article added to give the victims of torture the right to directly prosecute perpetrators. Military trials of civilians needs to cease immediately and every detainee who was not given a criminal trial be retried. Finally, the state must be responsible for prosecuting the prison security guards and administrators responsible for committing any crime or violation against detainees.

The third part pertains to overseeing the prisons. Currently, there are a few different institutions that have limited power over the prisons and their administrations. Many of the institutions have such limited power that they don’t exercise any power because they put the burden onto someone else. Forming a neutral commission to oversee daily life in the prison and investigate any complaints that arise of torture or mistreatment will ensure that the system stays just after the laws are changed and the prison system is remodeled.

**Political Rationale and Discussion**

Implementing the three-part solution based around rehabilitation and prisoners’ rights will be beneficial to many people but is expected to be met with a lot of backlash. The main opposition to the proposal will be from the current Egyptian administration. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi continues to assert the idea that they are determined to foster basic human rights and freedoms.[[13]](#endnote-13) But, the president has announced that those freedoms are not guaranteed when it comes to their efforts to combat terrorism and extremism for protection of national security.[[14]](#endnote-14) Additionally, members of the Interior Ministry’s National Security Agency are not likely to promote the elimination of torture or ensured basic human rights of prisoners.

Many will push for the current system to stay the same because it is easier than dealing with the issue, but the abuse of power can no longer continue. Egyptian Major General Ibrahim Abd al-Ghaffar, former Scorpion warden, was quoted when discussing Scorpion Prison saying “it was designed so that those who go in don’t come out again, unless dead.”[[15]](#endnote-15) With six known deaths, due to human rights abuses, the government must step in to ensure the prisoners’ rights. The current system has nothing set up to regulate the prison and gives too much power to the individual prison administrations. Strict regulations laid out by the government, the immediate cease of all torture, and a new system is what is required to fix Scorpion Prison.

Others will encourage the prison to be shut down all together. Simply shutting down Scorpion Prison will not fix the issue because the issue itself lies in the system and not the prison. Theoretically, if Scorpion Prison were shut down and the detainees transferred to different facilities then the abuses will just continue at a new site. By implementing my solution so that the system is designed more like the Nordic prison system and has laws put in place to protect prisoners’ rights, then these abuses will not be possible. There is a flaw in the design of Egypt’s prison system, not in the prison itself.

In the end, a variety of groups and individuals will support a reorganization of the Egyptian Prison system and the addition of laws to ensure the rights of detainees. One of the most apparent is the Human Rights Watch, they have done extensive research into Scorpion Prison and have made countless attempts to raise awareness of the human rights abuses. Family members of the detainees will be relieved to know that they don’t have to fear for the lives of their loved ones. Political advocates would also be in favor of this system because it exhibits respect to their basic human rights.

**Conclusion**

The only feasible solution to these inhumane abuses is creating regulations against torture, putting laws in place to ensure detainees rights, reorganizing of the justice system to mirror that of Nordic countries, and forming a neutral commission to oversee the jail. Implementation of these policies would create a precedent of respecting human rights and forming a justice system around rehabilitation. If the prison system was designed so that most prisoners would one-day be able to reenter society then there would be less detainees in the prisons. This would allow for prisons to not be so overcrowded and would ensure less prisoners for the state to worry about economically. Politically, this system will lead to less division between the state and activists’ groups which could ensure less rioting and protesting. If citizens feel as though their rights are being taken care of then there will be less backlash against the government and in the end, less political detainees.

1. Yvonne Ridley [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Joshua Hammer [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Human Rights Watch. “Egypt: Serious Abuses in Scorpion Prison.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Human Rights Watch. “Egypt: Serious Abuses in Scorpion Prison.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Abdul Rahman Badr Eldin, editor. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Middle East Monitor [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Human Rights Watch. “Egypt: Serious Abuses in Scorpion Prison.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Abdul Rahman Badr Eldin, editor. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Central Intelligence Agency [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. World Population Review [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The General Assembly of the United Nations [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. CNN [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Thuffman 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Human Rights Watch. “ISIS in Afghanistan; Egypt's Secretive Scorpion Prison; Thailand Torture: HRW Daily Brief.”

Works Cited

Central Intelligence Agency. “The World Factbook: EGYPT.” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 14 Nov. 2017, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html).

CNN. “Abdel Fattah el-Sisi Fast Facts.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 Nov. 2017, [www.cnn.com/2014/07/01/world/africa/abdel-fattah-el-sisi-fast-facts/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/01/world/africa/abdel-fattah-el-sisi-fast-facts/index.html).

Eldin, Abdul Rahman Badr, editor. *Human Rights in Egypt: What Could Possibly Be Worse?* The Egyptian Coordination For Rights and Freedoms, 2016, pp. 9–231, *Human Rights in Egypt: What Could Possibly Be Worse?*, [www.slideshare.net/ecrf/the-annual-report-of-2015-human-rights-in-egypt](http://www.slideshare.net/ecrf/the-annual-report-of-2015-human-rights-in-egypt).

Human Rights Watch. “Egypt.” *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Jan. 2017, [www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/egypt](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/egypt)

Human Rights Watch. “Egypt: Serious Abuses in Scorpion Prison.” *Human Rights Watch*, Human Rights Watch, 28 Sept. 2016, [www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/28/egypt-serious-abuses-scorpion-prison](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/28/egypt-serious-abuses-scorpion-prison).

Hammer, Joshua. “How Egypt’s Activists Became ‘Generation Jail’.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 Mar. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html).

Human Rights Watch. “ISIS in Afghanistan; Egypt's Secretive Scorpion Prison; Thailand Torture: HRW Daily Brief.” *Human Rights Watch*, 28 Sept. 2016, [www.hrw.org/the-day-in-human-rights/2016/09/28](http://www.hrw.org/the-day-in-human-rights/2016/09/28).

Middle East Monitor. “Politician writes from Egypt's Scorpion Prison: 'I pity my jailer'.” *Middle East Monitor*, 25 July 2017, [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170725-politician-writes-from-egypts-scorpion-prison-i-pity-my-jailer/](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170725-politician-writes-from-egypts-scorpion-prison-i-pity-my-jailer/).

Ridley, Yvonne. “The Sting of the Scorpion ... Egypt's Darkest Corner was the forerunner to Guantanamo | Yvonne Ridley.” *Yvonne Ridley - Analysis & Opinion*, yvonneridley.org/analysis-and-opinion/the-sting-of-the-scorpion-egypts-darkest-corner-was-the-forerunner-to-guantanamo/.

The General Assembly of the United Nations. “Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.” *OHCHR*, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, [www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx).

Thuffman. “Egypt takes action to investigate notorious prison.” *Al-Monitor*, 6 Nov. 2017, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/egypt-close-notorious-prison-cairo-tora.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/egypt-close-notorious-prison-cairo-tora.html).

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. “Law No. 58 01 The Year 1937 Promulgating The Penal Code.” *UNODC.org*, Egyptian Government, [www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/criminal\_code\_of\_egypt\_english\_html/Egypt\_Criminal\_Code\_English.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/criminal_code_of_egypt_english_html/Egypt_Criminal_Code_English.pdf).

World Population Review. “Sweden Population 2017.” *Sweden Population 2017 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)*, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/sweden-population/. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)