

# Human Rights Watch

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/22/egypt-49-executions-10-days>

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Mass Executions Follow Suspicious Prison Killings

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(Beirut) [Egyptian](#) authorities executed 15 men convicted for alleged involvement in three cases of political violence as well as 2 women and 32 men convicted in criminal cases between October 3 and 13, 2020, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should immediately halt executions, and re-try those sentenced to death in grossly unfair trials.

Thirteen of the 15 men charged with political violence had been held in Cairos Scorpion Prison. Their executions follow a suspicious incident inside Scorpions death row ward on September 23 in which Interior Ministry forces killed four prisoners after those prisoners killed four security personnel. Authorities [alleged](#) the prisoners were trying to escape.

Egypt's mass executions of scores of people in a matter of days is outrageous, said [Joe Stork](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. The systematic absence of fair trials in Egypt, especially in political cases, makes every death sentence a violation of the right to life.

The government typically does not announce executions, or even inform the prisoners family. On October 13, the pro-government *Al-Masry al-Youm* newspaper [published](#) the names of eight prisoners executed in the Maximum-Security Prison in Minya governorate, south of Cairo, including a woman. On October 6, pro-government newspaper *Al-Watan* [said](#) authorities in Cairo Istinaf Prison carried out 11 executions, including a woman, convicted in criminal cases. *Al-Watan* [reported](#) on October 3 that authorities executed [eight](#) prisoners and on October 8 another [seven](#) in Alexandria, in [murder](#) and [rape](#) cases.

The independent Al-Shehab Center for Human Rights [published](#) on October 7 the names of 15 people it said authorities had executed on October 3. Ten had been convicted in the South Giza Case 3455 of 2014, known as the *Ajnad Masr* (Soldiers of Egypt) case; three in the North Giza Case 4804 of 2013, known as the Kerdasa case; and two in the East Alexandria Case 6300 of 2013, known as the Alexandria Library case.

The Kerdasa and Alexandria Library cases stem from violent events coinciding with the August 14, 2013 [violent dispersal](#) of the largely peaceful Raba sit-in protesting the army's removal of President Mohamed Morsy, a day in which security forces probably [killed over 1,000](#) protesters.

The [Kerdasa case](#) involved violent protests and an armed attack by a mob on the Kerdasa police station, killing its warden and 12 other Interior Ministry officers and soldiers, and mutilating an officers body. A terrorism court sentenced 183 out of 188 defendants in a [grossly unfair](#) mass trial. The Cassation Court, Egypt's highest appeal court, [overturned](#) the ruling in February 2016 and ordered a retrial before a different [terrorism court](#), which in July 2017 sentenced 20 to death, 80 to life in prison, acquitted 21, and sentenced the rest to long prison terms. The Cassation Court upheld these sentences in September 2018. Seventeen of the 20 sentenced to death remained on death row. Nine leading Egyptian human rights organizations [said](#) in a 2018 statement that authorities ignored basic fair trial guarantees, including access to legal counsel and the need to establish individual criminal responsibility.

In the Alexandria Library case, authorities charged 71 people following violent protests near the library and killings of 16 people, including an officer and two soldiers, in different incidents. In September 2015, a criminal court in Alexandria sentenced three defendants to death, one of them in absentia, and the rest to prison. The Cassation Court [upheld](#) the death sentences in July 2017 and acquitted four defendants. Human Rights Watch reviewed 66 pages of the case file comprising the indictment and the evidence, mainly unsubstantiated allegations by security officers with scant material evidence that two executed, [Yasser Shokr](#) and [Yasser al-Abasiery](#), were responsible for the killings.

In the Ajnad Masr case, authorities charged [about 45](#) defendants of involvement in armed attacks by [Ajnad Masr, an extremist armed](#)

[group](#), which claimed responsibility for several attacks in 2014 and 2015. In December 2017, a Giza terrorism court [sentenced](#) 13 to death, others to prison terms, and acquitted 5. In May 2019, the Cassation Court [upheld](#) the sentences. Three people from this case remain on death row.

Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt has become [one of the top 10 countries](#) for executions and death sentences. Those arrested for alleged political violence frequently face a host of abuses including enforced disappearances, [torture to extract confessions](#), and no access to lawyers. In an examination of 28 death sentence cases since 2016, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights found that authorities had forcibly disappeared 198 people, and 212 said they had been tortured. The majority of those sentenced to death were convicted in [military](#) or [terrorism court](#) trials that do not meet fair trial standards.

Authorities routinely add dozens, sometimes hundreds, of defendants to a case without justification. Mass trials, which [became the norm after 2013](#) in political cases, do not allow sufficient time to present a defense or to establish individual criminal responsibility.

Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances. In 2017, Human Rights Watch said that President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and other officials should [issue a moratorium](#) on the death penalty in view of the sharp rise in the number of death sentences and the failure to pass a comprehensive transitional justice law.

The 13 executed in the Ajnad Masr and Kerdasa cases on October 3, 2020 were being held in Scorpion Prison, where the suspicious killings had occurred.

On September 23, pro-government news media, citing unnamed security sources, [reported](#) that Interior Ministry forces had killed four death row inmates as they tried to escape the Scorpion prison, killing three officers and injuring another officer and a soldier, [who died](#) the next day. Defense and Interior Ministry officials, including Interior Minister General Mahmoud Tawfik, [visited the prison](#) a few hours later, but the government released no official statement. Media [reported](#) the names of the inmates killed, including three whose death sentences the Cassation Court [upheld](#) in July.

Lawyers, families of inmates, and former prisoners [cast doubt](#) on the prison escape story on social media. Authorities had imposed a blanket ban on visits to Scorpion since May 2018 and deprived prisoners of exercise and medical care. The death row ward where the incident happened housed an estimated 25 inmates, a lawyer told Human Rights Watch. The lawyer, who spoke with relatives of two inmates, said that the four inmates killed took by surprise the officers who had come to routinely inspect their cell and slaughtered them using sharp tools. The lawyer said inmates have the capability to improvise sharp objects.

Following the killings, the four inmates cheered loudly, the lawyer said, adding that inmates in other cells heard them and saw blood in the corridor. Shortly afterward security forces came and gunshots were heard. The lawyer said that inmates in other cells believe the reinforced security personnel quickly took control and killed the four prisoners.

The independent rights group We Record [published a similar account](#) based on information from five witnesses. An activist with the group told Human Rights Watch that a person who saw the bodies of the four inmates said they had numerous gunshots to the head and chest.

Scorpion Prison, officially Maximum Security Prison 992, is highly secure, one of seven prisons inside Cairo's Tora Prison Complex and where authorities have placed many senior Muslim Brotherhood leaders, Islamic State (also known as ISIS) suspects, and other high-profile prisoners. Even if an individual managed to get outside Scorpion's heavily armed high walls, he would have to pass several kilometers inside the Tora Complex to reach the outer gates.

The lawyer in touch with families and the activist, both outside Egypt, told Human Rights Watch that they feared the executions on October 3 were in retaliation for the killing of the officers, and could have eliminated witnesses.

Egypt has had a pattern of [judicial](#) and [suspicious extrajudicial](#) killings following [attacks](#) on security forces or civilians in recent years, Human Rights Watch said. Several officials [including President al-Sisi](#) have spoken of revenge rather than law enforcement to justify executions.

Following the incident, the Prison Administration Authority conducted a nationwide prison inspection campaign, which prisoners call *tagreeda*, (stripping), seizing most of the prisoners' possessions, including purchased blankets and clothes, as well as hygiene tools, radios, and mattresses. A prisoner and families of inmates in three other prisons in the Tora Prison Complex told Human Rights Watch they have had such inspections since the incident.

One prisoner and another's relative said that prisoners in Tora Istiqbal Prison have undertaken a hunger strike. The independent Mada Masr site [reported](#) that hundreds had joined since October 9 to protest the intensive searches and confiscations.

The pattern of Egyptian authorities executing death row inmates following attacks on security forces makes halting executions even more urgent, Stork said.

#### **October 22, 2020:**

The first paragraph has been updated to reflect the correct number of executed men who were convicted in criminal cases.

Bahrain Death Sentences Follow Torture, Sham Trials

Suspicious Killings and Extrajudicial Executions by Egyptian Security Forces

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