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The Cry for Human Rights: Violence, Transition, and the Egyptian Revolution

In January 2011, Egypt and, indeed, the world witnessed something immense and unprecedented: millions of people from every sector of society took to the streets to overthrow their dictator. As known scholars and activists involved and interested in Egyptian politics, both authors of this essay were approached to comment on the momentous events and/or speak about them at public forums. Various media outlets sought out Atef Said, an Egyptian human rights lawyer and sociologist living in the area. The questions they asked, however, were disconcerting and followed a similar pattern: “What if Islamists take over? What about the fate of minorities and women?” Nadine Naber had a similar experience. From Facebook conversations to events at the university at which she taught, U.S.-based audiences consistently asked Naber about the potential for an “Islamic takeover” and the consequences for “women’s rights.”

Since January 2011, the revolution has taken many turns and much has transpired: the formation of new political parties; strikes by doctors, lawyers, and professors; grassroots funeral processions for newly declared martyrs; conflicting efforts to draft a new constitution; continued battles over public space; the formation of new feminist coalitions; the launching of massive campaigns against sexual harassment; the election of a new president; public protests and a military coup ousting that president; and a subsequent backlash against the briefly empowered Muslim Brotherhood—to name just some highlights. Yet despite these dramatic upheavals and ongoing changes, the primary questions we are asked by media or public audiences remain the same: what will happen if/when Islamists take over, and what about women and minorities? Speaking at a policy briefing for the United Nations in 2013, Nadine Naber cautioned audience members against reductive Islamophobic analyses that simply blame “Islam” for attacks against women’s rights in Egypt. She urged the international community to take seriously the impact on women’s rights of state-based corruption, sexual violence, and economic violence. But still, one audience member insisted on asking: “Do you think it [Islam] is going to spread throughout Africa?”

Our experiences reflect the kinds of analyses emerging from the U.S. media, government, and liberal human rights discourses about the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. Specifically, they reflect analyses that frame the struggles of the revolution through a liberal-Orientalist cry for human rights that envisions a unidirectional flow of concern and assistance from “here” (the United States) to “there” (Egypt). In this framing, “women” and “minorities” are the primary victims, while Islam is the perpetrator, the specter whose expanded rule would endanger the former.¹ The problems with this framing are twofold. First, it identifies Islam as the

primary obstacle to the success of the revolution and the realization of democracy in Egypt; and second, it relies on abstract concepts of individual and political rights under the law to evaluate revolutionary success.

Focusing on examples of this trend within public discussions regarding (1) the process of transition following the Egyptian revolution, and (2) violence—specifically, gendered sexual violence and torture in Egypt—this essay interrogates the liberal-Orientalist “cry for human rights.” We are particularly concerned with how this framing of human rights both relies on and reinforces global neoliberalism and its attendant forms of violence. We argue that such analyses fail to account for the complex historical and political contexts in which violence and transition take place and the multiple, interconnected structures of power that impact revolutionary change. Far from questioning the value of protecting women’s rights or human rights, we seek to examine the limitations inherent to liberal-Orientalist epistemological frameworks and to highlight the connections among interpersonal violence, Egyptian state violence, and U.S.-led imperial practices in Egypt.

The application of distorting Orientalist lenses to Egypt and the Middle East in general is hardly new. More than thirty years ago, Edward Said wrote that Orientalism configures the “East” through ahistorical attributes such as religiosity, tyranny, and oppression, which are then contrasted with the “West’s” rationality and modernity. Since the war on terror, numerous scholars have noted how new versions of Orientalism restage this clash of civilizations thesis: we have freedom and democracy, they have violence and terrorism. According to this thesis, Islam and Arab culture are part of an unchanging tradition fundamentally incompatible with civilization and existing essentially outside history.²

Parallel to this literature on new and enduring forms of Orientalism, other scholars have traced the emergence of a particular liberal, abstract conception of human rights, along with a transnational but still Western-dominated institutional apparatus for monitoring and (ostensibly) safeguarding such rights.³ Overall, this literature contends that liberal human rights approaches developed out of Eurocentric contexts of neoliberal expansion and operate through the epistemological structures of individualism and universality and the material structures of capitalism.⁴ Deploying ethnocentric concepts of human rights (freedom, liberty, and so on), these universalist approaches tend to blame oppression in the global south on abstract concepts of “culture” or “tradition” and have reified colonialist notions of a liberated, developed north and a victimized, underdeveloped global south that needs to be saved by Western heroes.⁵ Such Orientalist approaches to human rights have been particularly prominent in advocacy related to gender and women’s rights in Arab and Muslim countries.⁶

Here, we focus on human rights discourses that operate through this convergence of liberalism and Orientalism and argue that liberal-Orientalist human rights not only obscure political and historical conditions but also provide an imperialist vocabulary for neoliberal expansion and military domination. The essay is divided into three parts. We begin first by reviewing the primary events of the revolution itself and the transition period up to the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Our point is not to provide a complete summary but to begin challenging some of the narratives

of transition (or failed transition) that have circulated in Western-based coverage of events since the revolution. In the second section, we provide a comparison of reports and analyses of violence—with a particular focus on gender-based sexual violence—under, respectively, the Hosni Mubarak regime, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), and Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. We examine patterns in how and when discussions of violence alternately connected (or failed to connect) interpersonal violence and state violence, used Orientalist logics to conflate and explain both forms of violence, and obscured from view the broader geopolitical contexts that shape the phenomena of violence. In the third section, we focus on examples of U.S.-based discussions of torture in Egypt during the same period that ignored the various factors that extended the widespread use of torture by the Egyptian state—factors such as the adoption of harsh neoliberal economic policies and the transfer of governance to a militarized police state. We also analyze human rights reporting after the revolution that focused only on how violations could be traced to the rise of Islamists in power.

Background: Revolution and Transition, 2011–2013

This essay focuses on the “early” transitional period following the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, from the period of military rule under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) to the election of Mohamed Morsi as president and the subsequent Muslim Brotherhood–led government. While the events immediately leading up to and following the July 2013 ousting of President Morsi will be touched on in our discussion, we wrote the majority of this essay before this period. As a result, our discussion is limited to the transitional period preceding those events.

The simplest narrative of events in Egypt from 2011 to 2013 could go something like this. Egyptians took to the streets in huge public protests on January 25, 2011. Pictures that circulated around the world showed millions of people rallying, demanding the end of the Mubarak regime. After eighteen days of protest in Cairo’s famous Tahrir Square, Egyptians successfully ousted Mubarak from office. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the leadership body of the Egyptian military, succeeded Mubarak in ruling Egypt. This situation lasted for almost a year and a half; in June 2012, Egyptians democratically elected a new president, Mohamed Morsi. Morsi, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood–backed Freedom and Justice Party, took office on June 30, 2012.⁷ But by the end of June 2013, Egyptians took to the streets once again to oust the new president. Using the opportunity of the protest, the Egyptian military staged a coup and removed the president from office on July 3, 2013.

The problem, of course, is not so much with the basic contents of the above narrative but with the often sweeping and definitive analyses of causes, effects, intentions, and implications that have followed. Often told and read as revealing simple truths about who is democratic and who is not, whether an entire people is “ready” for democracy or not, who is to blame for the success or failure of the revolution, and so on, the events in Egypt often function like a screen onto which various commentators can project their assumptions and through which they attempt to exorcise various demons.⁸

We briefly review here two ways in which liberal-Orientalist, Western-based

coverage obscures the complexity of the transitional period. The first of these concerns the immediate transition of power from Mubarak to the SCAF.⁹ We know that on February 11, 2011, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces took charge of ruling Egypt. The move was framed from the beginning as a transitional one that would be in effect only until a democratically elected civilian government could take charge. What few, if any, Western-based reports noted, however, was how this very development obstructed the revolutionary changes for which Egyptian protestors had been calling. Constitutionally and legally, the SCAF was not chosen by the people to deal with the transition. Rather, Mubarak ceded power to the SCAF—a far less radical move when one takes into account that the Council’s nineteen army generals oversaw a significant component of Mubarak’s political apparatus and were thus *part* of the ruling regime that the revolution aimed to replace. Put simply, the SCAF was hardly a neutral body to govern during the transitional period.

The Council’s actions soon reflected this. Instead of writing a new constitution to reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people who had called for the end of Mubarak’s dictatorship, the SCAF worked with a handful of elites to make only limited amendments to Egypt’s constitution of 1971. The public was invited to vote in a referendum on the amendments only when they had already been drafted. In short, there was no room for wider, public discussions about what to do next; the people in the streets who provided the much-lauded, international “face” of the revolution were not included in deciding the fate of Egypt after Mubarak. Yet despite all of this, Western analysts were quick to celebrate Egypt’s “orderly transition”—a phrase coined by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton that captured the tidy way in which U.S. commentators sought to characterize the SCAF transition *and* obscure the complicated history of U.S. partnership with Egyptian military leaders. Egyptian activists and writers soon realized that “orderly transition” meant a tightly controlled transition to a narrow version of democracy that would disrupt neither the economic status quo in Egypt nor U.S. interests. As the scholar Adam Hanieh put it in May 2011:

The plethora of aid and investment initiatives advanced by the leading powers in recent days represents a conscious attempt to consolidate and reinforce the power of Egypt’s dominant class in the face of the ongoing popular mobilizations. They are part of, in other words, a sustained effort to restrain the revolution within the bounds of an “orderly transition.”¹⁰

Importantly, such a controlled process had no room for young revolutionaries, who were viewed as “scattered” and “unpredictable”—in short, the opposite of “orderly.”

Also obscured within this narrative of “orderly transition” is the fact that serious abuses of human rights continued under the SCAF. Military forces attacked labor strikes with tanks and stormed peaceful protests in Tahrir many times, resulting in the deaths of many protesters. In October 2011, thousands of Egyptian Christians and Muslim supporters were peacefully protesting sectarian violence and attacks on an Egyptian church in southern Egypt’s province, Aswan, when military and police forces attacked the rally, killing about thirty protesters and injuring more than two hundred. Proper investigations were not conducted, and the SCAF resisted taking any serious measures to reform the deadly police apparatus that was responsible for killing and

torturing Egyptians in the revolution and previous decades. This resistance was telling and, in fact, marks one of the major continuities linking both SCAF rule and the Morsi government, and the second aspect of this period that has been obscured in Western discussions.

To outside observers, there was a major shift in June 2012: Egyptians held their first democratic elections and voted Mohamed Morsi into power. One of Morsi's first actions was to diminish the authority of the military by discharging two top leaders from the SCAF, a move the *New York Times* described as "stunning" and an "upheaval" within Egypt's ruling apparatus.¹¹ A constitutional assembly was elected—not directly by the people, but by the members of the parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic parties. Then Morsi decided to put the draft of Egypt's constitution to a referendum, despite public critiques, and without building a national consensus. In December 2012, the constitution was approved by 63.9 percent of the voters, but only 33 percent of registered voters had participated. Domestic and international human rights groups criticized the constitution as being sectarian and constraining freedom of religion in Egypt, allowing only specific religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) the right to build places of worship. The constitution also established a sort of religious authority over Egyptian politics and legislation, expanding the meaning of Sharia to outlaw Baha'ism and Shi'ism in Egypt.

Perhaps the most paradoxical development, however, was Morsi's constitutional decree on November 14, 2012, to limit judicial supervision of decisions. Ostensibly, this was a response to the fact that most of the police officers who were responsible for killing protesters during the revolution were declared innocent and released. The irony, however, was that while Morsi claimed to have expanded his powers in order to achieve justice for the protestors killed, he continued to resist police reform. Instead, he ignored initiatives for police reform by Egyptian civil society-based organizations and continued to defend the police publicly while blaming protesters for the violence. He also authorized two fact-finding commissions to collect evidence about those responsible for killing protesters since the revolution began (under Mubarak, SCAF, and Morsi). But when the commission concluded that military and police personnel were involved in these killings, Morsi ignored their reports. In fact, many human rights abuses continued under Morsi, including torture and the killing of protesters.

To be sure, even this summary of events presents an oversimplified picture, and it bears emphasizing that our point is neither that nothing has actually changed in Egypt nor that the SCAF or Morsi ruined everything. The problem is that the complex dynamics of transition—the shifts *and* continuities—have been lost in liberal Western accounts that reduce the Egyptian revolution to a political-democratic revolution *only*, thus reductively equating democracy to a ballot box.¹² Not surprisingly, a common conclusion has emerged among critical scholars in the Middle East and, in some cases, among Western commentators themselves that "the West is getting it wrong." "It" here refers variously to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian Revolution, and/or the country's liberal and leftist youth.¹³ Documenting all the various ways in which Western accounts have, indeed, "got it wrong" is beyond the scope of this essay. But we contribute to this accounting of misrepresentation by focusing on two specific



Figure 1. Photograph of a tear gas container, on which is written “Made in the USA,” which circulated widely in social media in Egypt in 2011 during the revolution. American tear gas shipments persisted throughout the revolution and the transition, a fact largely unremarked by the media and even some NGOs. Photograph by Gigi Ibrahim.

issues that have been decontextualized and distorted in mainstream discussions: violence (particularly gendered sexual violence) and torture. Furthermore, we examine how liberal-Orientalist human rights discourse in particular has contributed to this problem.

Gendered Sexual Violence

In this section, we argue that human rights discourses based in the global north have tended to address gendered sexual violence in Egypt before and after the revolution in one of three ways: (1) focusing only on sexual violence in the streets under Mubarak; (2) focusing only on sexualized state violence under Mubarak; or (3) highlighting the interconnections between street and state violence, but only after the Muslim Brotherhood took power. We contend that these strategies have similar effects. In the first instance, dominant human rights discourses isolate sexual violence in the streets from state violence and, in doing so, reinforce Orientalism and culture-blaming. In the second instance, attention focuses on Mubarak and the SCAF’s sexualized state violence but obscures U.S. complicity in the practice of torture and sexual violence before and after the revolution. And in the third instance, human rights discourses finally connect state and interpersonal sexual violence, but through the specific lens of Islamophobia and concepts such as “conservative Islam.” Despite their differences, all three approaches obscure the geopolitical contexts in which sexual violence emerges and reify the cry for human rights from “here” to “there.” In contrast, we suggest an alternate framework that situates sexualized violence in the context of local and global power relations and accounts for the historical and material conditions through which such violence is produced.

It was not uncommon for U.S.-based reporting and human rights advocacy related to women in Egypt during the Mubarak era to focus on interpersonal instances of

gender violence, such as sexual harassment in the streets.¹⁴ While some international human rights approaches criticized Egyptian state violence, most avoided drawing any connections between state violence and street violence, and they certainly ignored the United States' role in supporting sexualized state violence in Egypt. By focusing on interpersonal instances of violence, these analyses singled out individual men (particularly poor Egyptian men) as perpetrators and explained sexual harassment as a social and cultural problem. Discussions of sexual violence during the revolution itself adhered to this pattern. U.S. media reporting on the case of Lara Logan (the white South African reporter sexually attacked in Tahrir during celebrations over the fall of Mubarak) exemplified the convergence of liberal-Orientalist approaches during this period. Coverage reified the Orientalist notion of a violent and misogynous Arab Muslim masculinity that is particularly savage toward white European women.¹⁵ To the extent that the story also served to raise questions about Egyptian women's safety, corporate media and dominant human rights agencies focused on whether and to what extent Egyptian women are protected by rights under the law.

More often, however, the coverage accorded to Lara Logan served to obscure the many attacks on Egyptian women in Tahrir Square by Mubarak-sponsored thugs during the same time period. Similarly, there was no mention of the many other forms of gender violence taking place in Tahrir. The clear message seemed to be: Lara Logan's body counts; in stark contrast, the bodies of women such as the Egyptian feminist activist professor Noha Radwan, attacked and severely beaten by plain-clothed Mubarak thugs, or Liza Mohamed Hasan, hit by a police car, do not. Many other Egyptian women could be named here, but the point is that their stories do not align with a liberal-Orientalist framework that sensationalizes gender violence in the Arab Muslim region only when it can be explained as a result of either individual male perpetrators or Arab culture (read: Islam). State actors, especially the United States and states supported by the United States (including Egypt), are not held accountable for violence against women.

Turning to discussions by Western-based media and human rights groups of state sexual violence, a similar pattern of omission emerges. The Mubarak regime used sexualized torture as a systematic practice, with military police forcing detainees to rape their own spouses in front of them, officers raping men in front of their spouses, or detainees being forced to sexually harass one another.¹⁶ But while Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International documented the use of rape, torture, and sexual assault to threaten and intimidate female activists who criticized the regime, these reports followed a similar pattern as the dominant human rights discourse.¹⁷ They framed state violence and street violence as distinct issues and failed to address the connections between the two. As a result, gender violence was framed as either a domestic problem of authoritarianism (i.e., the state will use gender violence to attack dissidents) or a sociocultural problem (Egyptian culture and/or religion [Islam] condones sexual violence in the streets).

More broadly, such approaches also failed to acknowledge a crucial grievance mobilizing Egyptians' demonstrations leading up to the 2011 revolution. For over a decade before the revolution, Egyptian activists had been arguing that sexual violence in Egypt was not only perpetuated by U.S. support for Egypt but also directly



Figure 2. Egyptian women rally in Tahrir Square on April 20, 2012, against SCAF rule and against systematic abuse of women under SCAF rule. Photo by Gigi Ibrahim.

imported to Egypt via the CIA's extraordinary rendition program. This illegal program, according to the UN Convention against Torture, sends people suspected by the United States of terrorism (extremely broadly defined) to countries like Egypt that are known for torture, sexual assault, and threats of rape of prisoners.¹⁸ Through extraordinary rendition, both the United States and Egyptian governments have endorsed the use of sexual violence in the war on terror. Abu Omar, for example, was kidnapped by the CIA in Milan, Italy, sent to Egypt by the United States and tortured, sexually assaulted, and raped at the hands of Egypt's security forces.¹⁹ In 2005, when women journalists protested Mubarak's domestic policies and the U.S.-Mubarak alliance in Egyptian and regional Arab politics, they were arrested and sexually assaulted by Egyptian military police.²⁰ In response to this and similar cases, Egyptian feminists fighting against sexualized state violence in Egypt challenged the United States' thirty-year unanswered support and complicity in Mubarak's policies, including President Barack Obama's leadership in the U.S. extraordinary rendition program.²¹ The extent of U.S. complicity in sexual violence and torture in Egypt was only reaffirmed after Mubarak stepped down and President Obama promoted Omar Suleiman—the coordinator of the extraordinary rendition program—as a potential new leader of Egypt.

By the time the SCAF took power and the eyes of the world were on Egypt, reports and news articles focusing on state violence against Egyptian women did increase to a certain extent but continued to follow particular patterns. First, U.S. complicity in state sexualized violence remained completely obscured, as usual. Second, though organizations like Amnesty International and Women Under Siege documented security forces calling women protesters whores and using virginity tests

to instill fear and suppress women's participation, such stories were still dwarfed by coverage of the Lara Logan incident.²² And finally, to the extent that coverage of state violence against Egyptian women did increase, it did so in ways that mapped onto long-standing Western Orientalist representations of Egypt, the Arab region, and Muslim majority societies. Virginity tests or Egyptian men referring to Egyptian women as whores, for example, hardly challenged Orientalist stereotypes.

Likewise, what came to be known as the "blue bra" incident—in which SCAF forces stripped and dragged an Egyptian woman protester through the streets, wearing, by that point, only pants and a blue bra—revealed the readiness of Western media and political figures to react hysterically to images that played on Orientalist fears and fetishes.²³ As the Egyptian feminist scholar and activist Hala Kamal put it, "What was most disturbing to me about the bra incident is the focus on this one woman being dragged by the military. The whole incident was being reduced to this one thing." The "whole incident" to which Hala Kamal referred was a larger set of clashes in December 2011 in Mohamed Mahmoud Street, in which SCAF forces used extreme force, killing over forty people and maiming many others. As Kamal wearily pointed out, the reduction of these bloody clashes to the single image of an Arab woman in a blue bra offered little critique of state violence as such but spoke volumes about the Western obsession with the naked, unveiled Arab Muslim woman's body.

Orientalist representations emanating from the global north became increasingly apparent after the Muslim Brotherhood took power. It was as if the corporate media and liberal human rights advocates finally had license to say what they had been thinking all along: the problem in Egypt is a patriarchal-misogynist culture and the culprit is Islam. Let us be clear: this period *has* witnessed a rise in reports of sexual violence and rape (including gang rapes against women protesters) and increased exclusion of women from political participation.²⁴ But when dominant discourse focuses only on Islam, as if Islam exists outside history, it fails to account for the broader context in which there are multiple factors at play—not least, a corrupt new neoliberal regime in control, obsessed with power and little concerned about human rights or social justice. Dominant human rights discourses also focus significantly on the need for equal rights for women under the law and women's equal political participation. Yet the problems of sexual violence or equal participation for women in Egypt are not simply about Islam, women's equal representation in the existing government, or even what ends up in the constitution or elections.

Not surprisingly, it is Egyptian women themselves who offer the most compelling perspective on the various (but depressingly similar) ways in which sexual violence has been used as a political tool of oppression both before and after the Egyptian revolution. This excerpt from a statement written by the coalition of Egyptian feminists and their allies illustrates a conceptualization of sexual violence under the Muslim Brotherhood that notes its connection to past practices, but without reifying Islamophobia and Orientalism:

In an attempt to stop Egyptian women from continuing their struggle towards fulfilling the goals of the January Revolution—Dignity, Freedom and Social Justice—organized groups have begun using weapons of sexual violence, ranging

from obscenity and sexual harassment to rape, mass rape, sexual mutilation and attempted murder, against women . . . Those responsible for these abhorrent acts bargain . . . on the complicity of law enforcement agencies and that they will not fulfill their role of protecting the protestors. The spate of mass sexual assaults against women has not stopped since the Mubarak regime started using sexual violence against women demonstrators in May 2005 . . . As we exposed the Mubarak regime and pursued them nationally and internationally, we will fight the current regime and the institutions that are responsible for or complicit in these crimes and we will pursue them legally nationally and internationally.²⁵

Here, the authors indicate that state-led sexual violence was set in place during the Mubarak regime and has continued to be used since as a political tool. They emphasize that women's struggles are connected to a larger revolutionary struggle and that Egyptian women are not victims who need to be saved by Western outsiders but agents who can craft and determine their own destiny.

Indeed, one of the most powerful ways in which Egyptian women attempt to shape their own destiny is by refusing to allow sexualized violence or even "women's equality," narrowly defined, to monopolize their focus. In ethnographic research conducted with twenty women activists from leading women's organizations, Naber repeatedly heard the women say that the analysis cannot begin or end with women, or portray women as the disproportionate victims of the new regime when the country still lacks a functioning democracy. They insisted that the question we need to ask is not simply "Are women included in or excluded from the new parliament?" Rather, we might ask whether the women of the revolution even *want* to be included in a corrupt government. Focusing only on "women's equality" ignores the reasons why many women are not interested in or do not trust formal politics, especially in the wake of sexual terrorism and excessive violence against them.

Torture in the Context of Neoliberalism and Militarism

Like gender violence, torture and other forms of bodily harm reinforced by the ruling regime should not be abstracted from the historical realities of global economic neoliberalism. In this section, however, we demonstrate and criticize the trend among international human rights groups to ignore the entangled local and global contexts out of which torture in Egypt emerged. Specifically, we argue that we cannot understand the systematic nature of the practice of torture in Egypt without explaining the neoliberal conditions that made and continue to make this practice widespread. To this end, we review the recent history of neoliberal policies in Egypt and note their imbrication with Mubarak's repressive state apparatus. Then we explore the tendency among international human rights reports to ignore the political and societal context of torture in favor of approaches that isolate human rights abuses from historical and material realities. We show how this tendency has the potential to reify what we call "the cry for human rights"—a cry that frames the problem as a local lack of human rights that will be fixed once advocates from the global north intervene and help to establish these rights. This "cry for human rights" is not Orientalist per se but resembles Orientalism by isolating the problems in Egypt from global conditions,

such as U.S. foreign policy in Egypt, and then implying the need to help or even save Egyptians from their corrupt regime and its practices.

Under Mubarak, the Egyptian state initiated a wholesale embrace of neoliberal economic and social policies, especially in the decade directly leading up to the revolution. Mubarak officially began applying structural adjustment programs in 1991. While both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank praised Egypt for its economic reforms, the country actually became more dependent in terms of food sustainability, and rates of unemployment and poverty increased. In 2009, more than 40 percent of the population lived below the poverty line.²⁶ Privatization and decreases in state funding steadily eroded public education and health care. Egypt's population suffered falling wages relative to inflation, and official unemployment was estimated at approximately 9.4 percent in 2010 (and much higher for the youth who spearheaded the January 25th Revolution).

Mubarak's Egypt was also a fertile site for corruption, increasingly described in recent accounts as a crony capitalist state, in which narrower and narrower segments of businessmen and elites controlled the economy, especially Mubarak's family and its networks. In addition, it is estimated that the Egyptian military controls at least 30 percent of the Egyptian economy, via industries that are not subjected to any civilian oversight. In June 2010, a group of fifteen local Egyptian human rights organizations submitted a report to the Human Rights Council on the status of economic and social rights in Egypt. The report highlighted how the failed economic and social policies of the neoliberal state in Egypt were becoming the most important challenge to any decent enjoyment of social and economic rights by the majority of Egyptians.²⁷

Dominant liberal human rights discourses tend to ignore this context when discussing what they often describe as Mubarak's police state. And yet, as Samer Soliman explains in *The Autumn of Dictatorship*, the rise of the police state in Egypt was crucial to and fused with Mubarak's crony capitalism and neoliberal policies.²⁸ These policies and the state's constant budget deficiency created a crisis of legitimacy for the regime. It needed to increase taxation but risked sparking public unrest among the already impoverished population. The solution was to rely on a steadily expanding repressive machinery. Under Mubarak, the Central Security Forces, a specific branch of police that works as an antiriot police force, reached almost half a million soldiers, while the total police force reached over one million personnel. Far from being limited to riots, these forces were used to attack protests and assemblies of all sorts. Central Security Forces were essentially a parallel army run by the Ministry of Interior. In 2009, the annual costs of this army were estimated to be around 900 million Egyptian pounds, which at the time was about 150 million dollars a year.²⁹ In the last year before the revolution, the budget for national security and police reached almost 20 percent of Egypt's total budget, while the high rates of poverty and unemployment continued.³⁰

Closer analyses of torture in Egypt show that its use has not been limited to political prisoners. Torture requires no criminal accusations, nor is it necessarily employed to secure information or confessions. It has been used to punish not only political activists but also workers who tried to strike against harsh neoliberal policies and peasants who resisted land reforms.³¹ Such practices have continued after

Mubarak: Egyptian human rights groups affirm that revolutionaries who criticized the SCAF and then the Muslim Brotherhood have similarly been targeted for torture, along with workers and peasants.³² This brings us to two prime examples of the ways human rights reporting from the global north about torture in Egypt lacks the context noted here: in its overemphasis on the *numbers* of torture cases on the one hand, and the establishment of crude comparisons between torture under Mubarak and his successors (the SCAF and then Morsi) on the other hand. Neither provides sufficient attention to the conditions and context of the torture itself.

First, although quantitative indicators and descriptive reporting are useful, they are not adequate, especially after a revolution.³³ Relying on numbers to indicate how widespread or common the practice of police torture is in Egypt is deeply problematic, especially given how systematic the practice has become. With years of practice, many officers (especially those who worked with state security intelligence) have become extremely skilled at leaving no marks on victims' bodies and knowing how long to detain them in order for most marks to disappear. And cases of mental torture, of course, leave no visible evidence. In some cases, victims fear retaliation and further torture and thus do not go to lawyers or human rights organizations to seek justice. The Forensic Medicine Agency is the main body that is responsible by law to inspect torture cases, including cases in which torture led to death. But the agency lacks independence as it is supervised by the minister of justice and is subjected to pressure by state security intelligence. There are therefore good reasons to question even the accuracy of quantitative reports.

Nonetheless, the larger problem here is that torture cannot be discussed outside the context of police reform or the socioeconomic context in which the necessary reforms have failed to materialize. Critical anthropologists who study human rights abuses have noted that relying on quantitative indicators and statistical measures hides not only the theoretical assumptions of such indicators but also the deeper causes of human rights violations.³⁴ As Sally Engle Merry states, "The deployment of statistical measures tends to replace political debate with technical expertise. The growing reliance on indicators provides an example of the dissemination of the corporate form of thinking and governance into broader social spheres."³⁵ There is nothing wrong with numbers per se, but when presented without contextual details, such as the role of the Forensic Medicine Agency in covering up torture, such measures do not tell us enough about the reality of torture in the country.

The tendency to draw crude comparisons between human rights problems under Mubarak and his successors is another example whereby international reporting of torture in Egypt can lack critical context.³⁶ This problem builds, in large part, on the first, for such comparisons are primarily based on the number of torture cases before and after Mubarak. But while it is important to note continuities in state practice over time, it is also important to examine the shifting contextual issues that shape and enable human rights violations. Consider, for example, the role of laws that narrowly define torture or that limit the rights of citizens to sue public officers. To compare only human rights abuses under Mubarak and his successors tells us little about how or why things got better or worse. Rather, we need in-depth, qualitative comparisons that examine how Mubarak and his successors dealt with the policing apparatus, and

we need research that looks at what changes have been made to the despotic legislative structure. Similarly, we need comparisons that gauge how people's awareness of torture and their anger about these issues have shifted over time, and whether, for example, this has made them more likely to report and demand responses to abuses. Conversely, we need also to consider whether Egyptians felt any pressure to suppress accounts of torture under Morsi, given their desire to present a success story of the country's first democratically elected president.

On a fundamental level, the framing of the problem in terms of whether more or less torture is happening in Egypt misses the point. The more important questions concern who is being targeted for torture and why; how structural conditions in the police apparatus, the legislature, and the economy have enabled the continuation of such practices; and what impact the revolution has had on people's mindset.

As discussed above, under Mubarak systematic torture was used against not only accused criminals and political dissidents but also the economically marginalized. The most important cases here are incidents of collective punishment for peasants who resisted new land reform laws and workers who organized or attempted to organize strikes. In some cases, security forces and armored vehicles blatantly attacked factories and killed workers; the most famous instance of this was the storming of the state-owned Helwan Steel Factory in 1989 to end a workers' strike by force, in which a worker was killed. To what extent, then, have the economic conditions that underpinned such practices shifted since the ousting of Mubarak?

During the transitional period under the SCAF and then Morsi, Egypt has been undergoing a serious economic crisis.³⁷ For example, the last budget under Morsi (2013–14) revealed astonishing numbers. This was the budget being discussed in the upper house (Shoura Council) when this essay was first being drafted. According to these numbers, new investments are expected to be no more than 15 percent, compared to 22 percent in 2008. The growth rate declined 2 percent to its lowest point in years. Government representatives stated their hope to raise this to 7 percent by 2022. In the meantime, the unemployment rate is approximately 13 percent of the workforce. Poverty affects about 50 percent of the population in some areas of the countryside. The poorest 20 percent in Egypt are getting only about 10 percent of Egypt's national GDP, while the richest 20 percent control nearly 40 percent of the GDP. The deficit in Egypt's budget was projected to reach almost 32 billion dollars in 2013–2014 alone.³⁸

Yet both the SCAF and Morsi continued to seek international loans and pursue neoliberal adjustments, without questioning their effect on the rising numbers of poor or on the development of democratic institutions. Furthermore, both regimes resisted proposals for police reform and, indeed, Morsi decided to raise the salaries of police officers.³⁹ The state security apparatus has been renamed the National Security Agency, but the change appears to be entirely superficial. Police and military have continued to storm factories and use force against workers in different parts of Egypt in order to end labor strikes, and torture has continued in Egyptian police stations.⁴⁰ Indeed, systematic violence and police assaults have increased radically against protesters in the streets. But the key is not just to point to the rise in statistical rates of torture from one regime to another but to provide a contextual comparison of the

impact of neoliberal conditions and the resistance of the state repressive apparatus to reform, regardless of who has been in power.

The specific forms of human rights abuse and torture that emerged during the Muslim Brotherhood's year in power, for example, warrant study. Alaa al-Aswany, a prominent Egyptian novelist and writer, has suggested that the undemocratic nature of the Muslim Brotherhood explains the specific forms of abuse under Morsi's rule.⁴¹ Other Egyptian critics have proposed that we need a new framework to understand how the Muslim Brotherhood has been transformed from a historically victimized group under Mubarak to an authoritarian group that justifies torture of its opposition. In spring 2013, a conservative prosecutor ordered that a detainee, arrested while drunk, be whipped, in keeping with Sharia law.⁴² The vagueness of the new constitution provided room for this interpretation. One can thus argue that human rights abuses in Egypt took a new twist when the Islamists came to power. But as we have argued above, this is still only a small part of the story of human rights abuses in Egypt, both before and after the revolution.

Notably, the reporting on torture has the potential to reify colonialist savior discourses that manifest here in terms of the cry for human rights from here (the global north) to there (Egypt). For instance, nearly all of the international human rights reports we studied define torture as a problem internal to the Egyptian domestic state while ignoring the ways the United States and Egypt collaborate in the torture that takes place within Egypt. This omission has the effect of reducing the culprits to excessively repressive Arab regimes and thus reinforcing the existing conceptualization in the global north of Arab societies as excessively violent and in need of Western democracy, human rights, and intervention.

Consider, for example, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International's reporting on torture in Egypt. On the one hand, it is important to recognize that both organizations seek to reveal grievous practices around the world that tend to affect the most marginalized populations. Both organizations also produce high-quality, rigorous research that is, in many cases, conducted with the assistance of human rights colleagues and local representatives in the countries in question. What they also share in common, however, is a tendency to focus on civil and political rights to the detriment of social and economic rights.⁴³ Amnesty International's reports accord some attention to international geopolitics, such as the United States' constant support of consecutive regimes in Egypt since the revolution, but Human Rights Watch reports tend to frame the human rights situation in Egypt as a purely domestic problem between repressive regime(s) and a suffering or struggling population.⁴⁴ Overall, both organizations fail to provide a more in-depth discussion of the broader political and economic context in which human rights abuses occur.

In this sense, both approaches reify the liberal-Orientalist discourses that have emerged repeatedly in the U.S. corporate news media. A report published in the *New York Times* during the period of Morsi's rule exemplifies these discourses.⁴⁵ Providing examples of torture that took place under Morsi, including violence by his supporters against revolutionary youth and the opposition, the report explains the torture through an analysis of primarily sectarian and religious differences that characterized all of these cases. Despite the usefulness of the report and the fact that the cases were,

indeed, well documented by Egyptian human rights NGOs, the discussion of sectarianism and religion is simplistic. The dominant narrative—that Islamists are torturers and they torture their opposition out of sectarian and religious motives—fails to comment on the broader political context, including the fact that both the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood relied on sectarian policies as a strategy for maintaining political power in the context of an ongoing revolution. In other words, they did not practice torture simply because they are Islamists; they practiced torture because it was politically efficacious to do so.

Conclusion

Human rights are a crucial indicator for the evaluation of democratic processes. After all, the revolution itself was triggered by incidents of police brutality, and the famous Facebook page *We are All Khaled Said* that mobilized so many people for the revolution was named after a blogger who died as a result of police brutality. Egyptians revolted against Mubarak's despotism and corruption, specifically against election fraud, police brutality, and attacks on freedom of assembly and association, among other things. But as many Egyptians and outside critics have emphasized, the Egyptian revolution was *against* the neoliberal state as much as it was *for* democracy.⁴⁶ The main slogans of the revolution reflected this: protestors called for bread, liberty, and economic and social justice at the same time. The decontextualized liberal-Orientalist “cry for human rights” fails to grasp this about the revolution and, thus, fails to recognize the full range of aspirations that have yet to be realized.

What, then, does it mean to contextualize the problems of gendered sexual violence and torture within the local and global conditions that both led to the revolution and face Egyptians today? An analysis that focuses primarily on interpersonal violence perpetrated by Egyptian men on Egyptian women cannot comprehensively explain problems such as sexual harassment in the Egyptian streets. As we have seen, the various Egyptian governing powers (Mubarak, the SCAF, and the Muslim Brotherhood) practiced gendered sexual violence directly (by targeting women protesters, for instance) and indirectly (by legitimizing it through their actions or failing to hold perpetrators accountable). U.S. imperial practices have also contributed to sexual violence in Egypt, as programs such as extraordinary rendition support, enable, and reinforce the acceptability of such violence as a form of domination and control. Similarly, problems such as women's exclusion from official politics cannot be solved solely through methods that seek to achieve equality between individual men and women (such as quota systems). These issues require larger structural changes, among them ending the violence against women activists that can dissuade women from political participation and creating a democratic regime that is not corrupt.

A comprehensive analysis of torture similarly requires an examination of the neoliberal conditions through which torture and other forms of violence have developed and expanded in Egypt. It requires stepping back from the misleading allure of statistics and the search for easy answers rooted in assumptions about the inherent violence and repression of certain regimes or religions. It requires recognizing the ways that broader neoliberal economic strategies continue to create the conditions of torture and repression. It also requires more rigorous analysis about how torture targets both

political opposition and economically marginalized groups—something that was happening before the revolution and continued in the transition.

Locating violence in Egypt within these transnational contexts can inform the ways scholars and activists seek to build solidarity with Egyptian people and the Egyptian revolution. For instance, feminists committed to supporting Egyptian women's struggles might consider working for change in relation to multiple, simultaneous structures of gender violence, including United States–led militarism and war as well as Egyptian state corruption. We might imagine what it could look like if more scholars and activists in the United States focused on the accountability of the U.S. state in contributing to various forms of violence that Egyptian women and men face (such as poverty, torture, and gender violence), rather than pointing their fingers at abstract notions of Egyptian culture, gender, sexuality, or rights. Efforts to re-imagine transnational solidarity with a critique of the U.S. empire at the center is one strategy for transcending liberal-Orientalist approaches to human rights and their colonial underpinnings. Ultimately, this essay is a call to develop forms of transnational scholarship that analyze political transitions, human rights, and diverse forms of violence, while taking into account the role of international geopolitics and imperialism, as well as the neoliberal conditions of misery that characterize the Middle East, Africa, and so many developing nations. Such scholarship should be based on international solidarity, not cultural homogenizations and Orientalist epistemologies and methodologies. And perhaps most important, such scholarship should be less concerned with “saving” certain populations and more concerned with recognizing and representing the full breadth of their experiences and aspirations.

NOTES

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5. Leti Volpp, "Feminism Versus Multiculturalism," *Columbia Law Review* 101, no. 5 (June 1, 2001): 1181–218.
6. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Seductions of the 'Honor Crime,'" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 17–63; Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
7. The difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party confuses many observers, particularly given the former's increasing politicization over time. Briefly: The Muslim Brotherhood was illegal under Mubarak but continued to survive and grow. After the revolution, its leaders established the Freedom and Justice Party as an explicitly political party. But not all members of the Muslim Brotherhood are members of the Freedom and Justice party and, indeed, the relationship between the two entities is often unclear and ambivalent, even to those within the organizations.
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13. See, for example, Hassan Hassan, "Even as the Sands Shift, the Brotherhood Stays the Same," *The National*, February 4, 2014; Cynthia Schneider, "U.S. Gets It Wrong with Egypt," Brookings Institute website, January 25, 2013, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/25-egypt-schneider>; Khaled Shaalan, "Why the Western Media Is Getting the Muslim Brotherhood Wrong," *Jadaliyya*, July 3, 2013; and Michael Totten, "Getting the Muslim Brotherhood Wrong," *World Affairs Journal*, July 11, 2013.
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17. See, for example, Human Rights Watch Staff, "Egypt: Prosecute Sexual Assaults on Protesters: Punish Military and Police Attackers," *Human Rights Watch*, December 22, 2011; Human Rights Watch Staff, "Egypt: Military Impunity for Violence against Women," *Human Rights Watch*, April 7, 2012; Amnesty International, "Egypt: Checklist to Combat Sexual and Gender-Based Violence" (Amnesty International Publications, March 15, 2013); Amnesty International, "Egypt: Gender-Based Violence against Women around Tahrir Square" (London: Amnesty International Publications, February, 2013).

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