



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## **PROMINENT EGYPTIAN BLOGGERS AND ACTIVISTS ARRESTED:**

### **THE GROUP INTENDED TO DEMONSTRATE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM SOLIDARITY AGAINST SECTARIAN VIOLENCE**

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Washington, DC (1/15/10) – At least twenty leading bloggers and democracy activists were detained by Egyptian authorities today and reportedly charged with “illegal assembling and disorderly conduct/causing unrest.” The group includes Bassem Samir of the Egyptian Democratic Academy, who is scheduled to visit Washington from January 17-23 as one of six representatives of conferences held in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), the U.S. Institute of Peace, and Georgetown University’s Center for Democracy and Civil Society. The six representatives, including Bassem, are currently scheduled to meet with leading U.S. policymakers next week during their visit and to speak publicly at a conference in the U.S. Capitol on January 20, the one-year anniversary of President Obama’s inauguration.

The group arrested in Egypt, which includes prominent Coptic Christian and Muslim activists and bloggers, had traveled to the town of Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt to express Christian-Muslim solidarity in the wake of recent violence against Coptic Christians in that town on January 6, the Eve of Coptic Christmas. Upon arrival in Nag Hammadi this morning, Egyptian security services detained at least twenty members of the group, who at this time remain in the custody of Egyptian authorities, despite repeated promises to release them at several points during the day. These arrests are the latest in a long series of arrests by the Egyptian government targeting private Egyptian citizens who express themselves politically.

The Obama administration has frequently highlighted the importance of freedom of expression. In October, the United States co-sponsored a resolution championing freedom of expression together with the Government of Egypt. President Obama, in his June 4<sup>th</sup> speech in Cairo, promised to promote free online dialogue, “so that a young person in Kansas can communicate instantly with a young person in Cairo.” Secretary Clinton told a group of civic activists in Morocco: “You have before you people who have paid a big price for standing up for democracy, for fighting against corruption, for asking that government actions be transparent and accountable. And I want to stand with them because the United States stands with them, and we want to be sure that we send a very clear message to the region and to individual leaders that it is in their interest to work with these men and women.” As noted in a recent Washington Post editorial, Egypt is ranked 143<sup>rd</sup> out of 175 countries worldwide for the level of

press freedom by Reporters without Borders. The country receives more than \$1.5 billion annually in U.S. foreign assistance.

POMED expresses its deepest concern for these events. We urge the Egyptian government to release the group immediately and to take significant steps to strengthen freedom of expression in Egypt. We ask that Egyptian authorities refrain from interfering with Bassem Samir's scheduled travel to the United States to participate in dialogue events and meetings in Washington next week.

POMED will continue to communicate with our colleagues in Egypt about these troubling events, and we will include updates on our blog (<http://pomed.org/blog>) as the situation evolves.

If released and permitted to travel, Bassem Samir will be speaking at a public event on Wednesday, January 20<sup>th</sup> from 8:30 AM – 11:30 AM at the U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center (Room SVC 203).