

Free, Tarek and John

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Tarek Loubani and John Greyson are free, while hundreds of others who were arrested with them are still in jail. The prosecutor had pledged repeatedly that the “two Canadians” would be treated no differently than the 600 others detained at the same time. But eventually he released the same Canadians while the others remain detained. We do not know what exactly made the difference in their case, but there are many things that Tarek and John had going for them that others do not. This article will discuss some of these things, provide some of the political context of their arrest, and explain some of the decisions that were made by those who were trying to get them released.

The campaign to free Tarek and John required Western pressure on Egypt. Not a policy of purely declaratory diplomacy, which can easily ring hollow, but credible signals that trade and diplomatic consequences were on the horizon. This would play out not only in the Canadian-Egyptian bilateral relationship, but also in broader relations between Egypt and the West (above all, the US).

The international political context constrained the campaign to free Tarek and John. Most important is the relationship between the West and Egypt on two key issues: 1) the Israel-Palestine conflict and the siege of Gaza, and 2) the suppression of human rights and democracy within Egypt’s borders.

Egypt, the West, Israel, and the Palestinians

Tarek and John were arrested in Egypt, but they were not in Egypt because they had a position on Egyptian politics. They were on their way to Gaza, a besieged and occupied Palestinian territory.¹ In the early days after their arrest, some people asked why, if they were going to Gaza, did they not simply fly into the Gaza airport? But Israel destroyed the Gaza airport in 2001, three years after its 1998 opening, by bombing it from the air, and demolished it with bulldozers the following year. Now Israel maintains a tight siege on Gaza, trapping Palestinians and restricting the movement of supplies and visitors, including doctors, filmmakers, and everyone else. Gaza also borders Egypt, whose government could offer relief from the siege, but has instead embraced a role as secondary partner to Israel in maintaining it. Still, Tarek had led medical missions to Gaza from Egypt before, obtaining all the necessary permits from Egypt to do so as in this case, and Tarek and John had a better chance getting into Gaza from Egypt than they would have from Israel.

¹ Israel maintains what it calls “freedom of action” in Gaza, meaning a declared right to bomb or invade at will, and also maintains effective control from the air, sea, and three of Gaza’s four borders. Although Israel has always denied its status as an occupying power, in Gaza as in the West Bank, in fact the occupation continues
<<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8807/is-gaza-still-occupied-and-why-does-it-matter>>.

The Egyptian military is a crucial ally of the West in the Middle East, and the alliance earns Egypt \$1.3 billion in annual US aid. This level of aid is second only to US aid to Israel, and it is no coincidence: Egypt's share hinges on its cooperation with Israel. The aid flows directly from the Camp David Accords and the "separate peace" of 1978-9, enacted under Mubarak's predecessor, Anwar Sadat. These agreements have shaped the Israel-Palestine conflict ever since. By removing Egypt from the conflict, the US cleared the way for Israel to attack the Palestinians in Lebanon, culminating in the invasion of 1982, and eased Israel's task of maintaining the military occupation of Palestinian territory (against Palestinian protest and international condemnation). It also found a valuable regional ally to bolster US control of diplomacy on Palestine.

For Israel and many of its allies in the West, the logic is barely concealed: Egyptian democracy is incompatible with the politics of the Camp David alliance. The occupation and siege of Palestine is unpopular in Egypt, and a democratic Egypt would never support it. For Israel and the West, an Egyptian dictatorship yields a better Egyptian position on the Israeli occupation and siege.

The Israeli leadership is publicly protective of authoritarian rule in Egypt, and not without reason. As the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations of the 1990s became more and more clearly a cover for Israel's continued occupation, Egypt's Mubarak government, a veteran client of US "peace process" politics, played a critical part in the US-orchestrated show. When the "Israeli-Palestinian track" collapsed in 2000 and the Second Intifada began, it was Egypt, with Jordan, that worked from the Cairo Summit to keep Palestinians isolated from real regional support.² And over the last several years, Egypt has directly partnered with Israel in the siege of Gaza, which Egypt ruthlessly enforced even during the 23-day Israeli assault of 2008-9 ("Operation Cast Lead").

It's not only the case that ever since the rule of Anwar Sadat, Egyptian military authoritarianism has derived the major part of its official prestige in the West from its approach to Israel. It's also that in the practical politics of Egyptian-Israeli alignment, the front lines for public advocacy on Egypt's behalf in the West are mostly taken care of by advocates for Israel.

This has been especially obvious during the past few months. Many observers were horrified by the repression of August 2013, including the mass killings which Tarek and John witnessed and the mass arrests in which they were swept up. The democratic space that had been opened up by the 2011 uprising that ousted Mubarak was, it seemed, being violently closed. For much the same reason, Israel, which watched Mubarak's ouster in 2011 with public concern,³ has since August been playing diplomatic advocate for Egypt's new junta.

In talks with US officials in August, Israel pressed the case for the junta, urging the US to maintain the military and other aid structured by the Camp David order.⁴ And this line of advocacy continues to the

2 Yoram Meital, *Peace in Tatters: Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), p. 101.

3 The official Israeli mood was captured in the cynical commentary by *Ha'aretz* editorial board member Ari Shavit, "Obama's Betrayal; As goes Mubarak, So Goes US Might," *Ha'aretz* (January 31 2011). <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/obama-s-betrayal-as-goes-mubarak-so-goes-u-s-might-1.340244>.

4 This has been widely discussed in the press. See for example the JPost editorial "Egypt, US aid and Israel," *The Jerusalem Post* (October 10 2013).

present. The *New York Times* for October 10 quotes an Israeli official as saying that if the US tries to disassociate itself from the junta's embarrassing repression by reducing military aid, "people will see it as the United States dropping a friend." Prime Minister Netanyahu adds that Egypt's cooperation with Israel has been "premised on American aid to Egypt, and I think that for us is the main consideration".⁵ Thus Israel is publicly fighting even cosmetic cuts in US military assistance.

Tarek and John wished to get to Gaza, unwilling to go along with the isolation and suffocation of the territory. Under conditions of the current siege, people trying to get to Gaza need to navigate Egypt. Unfortunately, they were travelling during a volatile time, when Egyptian participation in the siege was surging back to its peak in the final years of Mubarak's rule. It is in this context that they found themselves unable to travel to Gaza on August 15, and stayed in Cairo until August 16, when they went to Ramses Square.

The West and Egypt's dictatorship

The international politics of Egypt and Israel/Palestine prevented Tarek and John from getting to Gaza. The domestic politics of Egypt's revolution saw them witness a massacre.

The US publicly states that it promotes democracy in Egypt, but the pattern since the earliest days of US involvement in the region has been one of support for dictatorship. In July 1952, the "Free Officers" overturned Egypt's monarchy. When the Free Officers hanged the leaders of an August strike of textile workers at Kafr el-Dawwar, the US welcomed this as a signal that the new regime would not allow workers and peasants to transform the overthrow of the monarchy into a general social revolution.⁶ The hangings "sealed US approval of the Free Officers," as one British academic recently wrote.⁷ US embassy officials were enthusiastic, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson soon promised Egypt "the active friendship of the United States."⁸

But before long, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser began to resist the West's economic dictates and Cold War military pacts, and Egypt found itself at odds with the West. Nasser's armies were defeated by Israel in 1967, and he died in 1970, to be succeeded by Anwar Sadat. After the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel, the United States brokered a peace that put massive support behind the Egyptian military. The unspoken condition of that support was that the army was henceforth to be used only within Egypt's borders, and only against the Egyptian population. Since the 1970s, both the US and Egypt have fulfilled their ends of the bargain. Army intervention against the "bread riots" of early 1977, which had been sparked by Sadat's implementation of IMF recommendations to slash subsidies for basic consumer commodities, set the basic pattern.⁹

5 Isabel Kershner, "Israel Expresses Dismay at Cutback of US Aid to Egypt," *The New York Times* (October 10, 2013).

6 Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 70.

7 Simon C. Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East: Britain, the United States and Postwar Decolonization, 1945-1973* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 21.

8 Abdel-Malek, *Egypt*, p. 97.

9 Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, "Introduction," and Joel Beinin, "Workers' struggles under 'socialism' and neoliberalism," in El-Mahdi and Marfleet, eds., *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (London: Zed Books, 2009), pp. 4 & 70.

After Sadat's assassination, the dictatorship was refined by Hosni Mubarak, who ruled the country for 30 years. He was ousted by popular uprising in 2011, but the structures of the dictatorship, in bureaucracy, industry, foreign relations, and culture, were not uprooted. Instead, a constitutional process and election took place under the supervision of the Army. The only organized force, the Muslim Brotherhood, managed to win a tenuous grip on power in a kind of alliance with the Army, but proved exceedingly unpopular. The Muslim Brotherhood, too, was overthrown on June 30th, with huge demonstrations against its rule, and the Army returned to direct control.¹⁰

Many who observed from the outside thought that in this moment, the demonstrators who took the initiative to overthrow Mubarak in 2011 would keep the initiative after overthrowing Morsi in 2013.

Instead, a bloody coup ensued, with most social-democratic elements silenced, some social-democratic leaders joining the military government, and those who opposed the coup (including the Muslim Brotherhood, but others as well) facing some of the worst massacres and human rights violations in Egypt's history. The worst massacre of all was on August 14, while Tarek and John were en route to Egypt, and its toll, we now know, was around 1000 people dead.

A public massacre is a technique for terrorizing a population into submission, but Mubarak's dictatorship, many of whose personnel are now back in charge, developed other techniques over the years, which they proceeded to apply – and which Tarek and John were also caught up in.

The dictatorship's techniques

Over the decades - and as we learned for ourselves these past two months - the dictatorship has developed a wide range of psychological warfare techniques for controlling the population. It uses these techniques to terrorize, to manipulate, and to instill fear and obedience. The most obvious technique, the one that Tarek and John witnessed, is the massacre, already discussed. In addition, there are several others.

The mass roundup. Tarek and John met many other detainees who, like them, were arrested after the demonstration, at checkpoints or in their homes. Gathering large numbers of detainees together and throwing a wide range of accusations at the entire group, the dictatorship is able to sow public doubt about the detained, to defame them, to destroy their reputations, and to make it difficult for them to find legal representation. Mass roundups have two additional uses. First, they provide sustained headlines about 'terrorists' and the military's struggle against this domestic enemy. Second, swathes of the population are absorbed in trying to cope with having loved ones behind bars, making it more difficult to organize or even imagine opposition to the regime.

The “welcoming committee”. Tarek and John describe their beating in considerable detail. Those who beat them were well-trained. They avoided areas of the face that would leave visible injuries and targeted kidneys and the back in order to inflict maximum pain without visible damage. When Tarek and John first tried to see a doctor, they were sent a military doctor, and only after protest did they manage to get an independent doctor to prepare a medical report of their abuse at the hands of Egyptian

¹⁰ Like Turkey and Pakistan, Egypt's military is not only a major force in politics, it is also a major force in the economy and business world.

authorities. That report is now in the hands of Canada's Foreign Affairs Department, DFATD. This was a luxury not afforded to most Egyptians. The initial beating, humiliation, hot-boxing, etc., are techniques to establish dominance, to win and ensure compliance among prisoners. It is a short leap indeed to treating the entire population this way.

Prosecutorial discretion. The law allows incredible latitude to prosecutors. Preventive detention for months, renewed periodically to give people false hopes and legal procedures to cling to, is widespread. The police can fabricate evidence, and play out their accusations in the state-controlled and censored or state-influenced media. The memory sticks, the “drones”, the “sophisticated equipment” supposedly found in Tarek and John's room, are all very similar to stories that have been trotted out by the prosecutor before and since.¹¹

Apparently crazy behaviour. The dictatorship also keeps observers and detainees off balance by deliberately behaving arbitrarily and crazily. In turn, the arbitrary behaviour can in one moment signal release (as Tarek and John's families were told repeatedly), the next moment charges (as was being threatened), a change in the charge sheet, a fabrication of evidence, etc.

These techniques demonstrate that in a dictatorship like Egypt's, all imprisonment is political. There are certainly criminals – killers, thieves, traffickers – in jail, but there are also known criminals in the government. The judicial system is a tool in the hands of the dictatorship for persecuting opponents and for terrorizing the population. No strategy based on proving innocence can be reliable in such a situation. The only viable strategy is political.

Consular constructive engagement

Mubarak and the generals in charge now are Western-friendly. They work with Israel. They besiege the Palestinians. They get billions in aid. What they do to the population, they do with the blessing of the West. But they do so as part of a gentlemen's agreement: Westerners aren't normally supposed to get caught up in it.

Consulars seek to keep that agreement, and a few jailed Westerners or one or two killed Westerners isn't enough to endanger it. The relationship is important, and if there's any doubt about guilt or innocence, it's not worth endangering the relationship for any given person who might have gotten caught up in events. In August, as now, the Egyptian regime sees itself as fighting for its life, and Canada, like the US, wants to support that regime for the reasons described above. As a consequence, turning to the Canadian Embassy alone for help getting out of jail was not, ultimately, going to be sufficient.

The Canadian Embassy was very helpful, and this cannot be denied. They were able to find Tarek and John, they were able to visit them and to provide us with a list of lawyers we could hire (one of which took the case). As a political case involving Canadians, however, seeking a political solution would

¹¹ James Henry, a 66-year old American citizen, was found hanged in his Egyptian prison cell on October 13. He, too, had been trying to get to Gaza and was arrested after curfew. He, too, had his detention extended twice. The prosecutor said they had found “a map of Egypt and an advanced electronic device”. October 13, 2013. “Egypt inquiry into jail death of US man James Henry”, BBC. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24513439>. And then, of course, there is the stork: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/07/arrested-spy-stork-killed-eaten-egypt>

require investment of political capital from the Canadian government. Getting that investment would involve the Canadian public, which we could only reach through the Canadian media. To do this politically, we would have to raise the profile of the case and convince Canadians that Tarek and John should be freed.

Tarek and John's "activism"

The first question that we would have to answer was, did Tarek and John go to Egypt to help the Muslim Brotherhood? Obviously not. They were in Egypt because it was their only way to get to Gaza. To the extent that they identified with Egyptian politics at all, Tarek and John, like us, identified with the leftists in Egypt who supported neither the military nor the Brotherhood.

With some misgivings but the two of them in immediate danger, we downplayed both the fact that John is openly gay and the fact that Tarek is Palestinian. Being gay is always potentially dangerous to someone in jail, and Palestinians are currently a public enemy in Egypt (and not far from it in Canada). Palestinians are also all too easily painted as potential 'terrorists' in racist portrayals of the Israel-Palestine conflict throughout the West.

Of course, the next kind of unsympathetic character to the Canadian media is the 'activist', or the 'protester'. To the media, someone who acts out of principle to protest a policy or a government is more likely to be suspected of having a hidden agenda than the 'ordinary Canadian' who is affected by a policy or a professional or expert who has an opinion about a topic to share.

Were Tarek and John *activists*? Well, yes, but they were not at the Egyptian protests as protesters. Their "activism" was embedded in a way that didn't fit the negative stereotype of what "activists" are. Both have participated in protest activities in Canada, but they did not travel to Egypt to participate in protests. Tarek is much more of a medical humanitarian than a "protester", John is much more of an artist and filmmaker than a "protester". They have beliefs that are controversial, and they take action out of principle, but their activities (medicine, film) are highly and generally valued well beyond "activist" circles. To argue against Tarek and John's type of "activism" is to say Palestinians shouldn't have medical care, or victims of a massacre shouldn't have their story told. Some writers did try to make these arguments, but they were ultimately from the small number of toxic columnists who are widely known to produce poorly informed and shoddy work.

The difference between a "witness", one who provides first aid, or one who records events, and a "participant" in demonstrations, is likewise not difficult for the public to understand, even if the governments who are slaughtering and arresting people at demonstrations routinely fail to make that distinction. Advocating on behalf of Tarek and John meant making this distinction clear. This had the effect of separating their case, and ultimate fate, from that of participants in the demonstrations. Even if, like us, you disagree with the Muslim Brotherhood, including finding many of their practices no less abhorrent than those of the dictatorship, it is a decision with moral consequence to hold out two foreign individuals from the rest of the detainees and advocate that they should be dealt with separately, because we could prove they were "witnesses" and not "participants". We could vouch for Tarek and

John, we knew their character and their mission, and could speak confidently, even before knowing the details, about what they must have done on August 16. We also had points of leverage in the Canadian public arena, and with the Canadian government, that didn't transfer to action on the broader issue of arbitrary imprisonment. The point was and is painful, but the campaign worked partly because it was narrow and focused. Egyptian government public relations efforts to justify indiscriminate imprisonment took some hits, but unfortunately these were secondary to our main objective.

So that was the situation we faced on August 16. Tarek and John had been arrested by the Egyptian dictatorship. We had a few things going for us. Tarek and John had squeaky clean records – the only “dirt” to be dug up on them was their participation in protests against wars and human rights violations, their artistic and medical work, and their principled conduct as people of conscience. They were also both extraordinarily well connected, with university affiliations, as well as in John's case connections to the artistic and cultural communities, and in Tarek's case connections to the medical and humanitarian communities. They were not in Egypt to protest, they had done humanitarian and journalistic work, they were quickly found by consulars, and we fairly quickly hired them local lawyers.

On the other hand, we had a few things going against us. Tarek and John have long records of work in solidarity with Palestinians, who are under siege and military occupation by Israel and, in Gaza, Egypt as well. The Canadian government, whose support we needed, is an unconditional supporter of this siege in international forums. On the Palestine issue, the Canadian media range from hysterically racist on one end of the spectrum to striving for a balance that does not exist on the other. In Egypt, Palestinians in Gaza have become a scapegoat for the military dictatorship, who claim that the Hamas government in Gaza is to blame for everything. Tarek's Palestinian identity and John's Palestine activism, for example in *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QUAIA)*, were not going to help us with the the Canadian media or much of the Canadian public.

In Egypt, after a year in power, the Muslim Brotherhood had gone from the best-organized political force to a taboo organization to blame for everything. They were ousted at the end of June. It started with massive popular demonstrations against their rule and ended with massive bloodshed against their people and the return of the same military dictatorship that had ruled Egypt in the decades before 2011. The state and private media were rabidly against the MB and pro-Army. The MB's unpopularity had muted support for the ousted government, while support for Egypt's Army continued to hold strong for a plurality of people even with all the bloodshed. We were told that even though all Tarek and John did was to conduct humanitarian and documentary activities, even though they had no political agenda in Gaza, the fact that Tarek medically helped MB protesters that the Army intended to kill, and John filmed the Army killing them, would be enough to make them unpopular in Egypt, and associating with them taboo or worse in the Egyptian media and public conversation.

This was both horrifying and telling. Our understanding of Egypt's current politics is that neither the pro-Army, nor pro-MB, nor liberal/social-democratic current has overwhelming public support. The pro-Army current may be in power now, the MB in tatters, the liberals silenced, but that may not be the case forever. The real danger to the Army would be if public opinion started to turn against them in Egypt, something that is eventually going to happen anyway. Would we be able to help accelerate the process?

Our efforts to free Tarek and John came out in four phases. Key decisions were made in the first fifteen days of administrative detention. Between day 15 and day 30, Tarek and John prepared for the second renewal of detention, which they were confident was coming, and their hunger strike, while we tried to raise the profile of the case from a Canadian to an international profile. In the third phase, leading up to day 45, we began to work on making an issue out of Tarek and John in Egypt itself, and began research on how we might begin to affect Egypt's economic and political interests in North America and Europe. We were beginning to roll out this last phase when Tarek and John were released.

Phase one: "The two Canadians"

Tarek and John left for Egypt at a time of instability, but the worst massacre after the coup occurred while they were flying, on August 14, when approximately 1000 people were killed in a single day. On the 15th, Tarek and John arrived in Cairo and realized they would not be able to travel. That day, Tarek said that they were going to go witness the protests. I (Justin) told him I would do the same, were I there. I have wondered since whether that was the wrong thing to say. Knowing what followed, I would of course have advised them differently. But these were historic events, and Tarek and John were well placed to be witnesses to them. I did understand why they wanted to be there, and why they did what they did afterwards.

When I got the call on August 16th, Tarek advised me to wait a few hours before calling the consulate. There had been many instances over the previous days of "catch and release", in which police captured journalists and then let them go. I hoped Tarek and John would fall into this category. When they were not, I contacted the consular SOS service, as well as Tarek and John's families, and then activist friends who work in Egypt. Eventually I heard from friends in Egypt that Tarek and John had been found by the Canadian Embassy. Consulars gave us a list of lawyers, and we were hearing good things from Egyptian friends about the office we eventually got. We had to try several lawyers, many of whom refused to take the case, before one accepted.

One early discussion, quickly discarded, was the possibility that Tarek and John were being held in an attempt to extort a bribe. This might have been the case if they had been picked up at a regular time. But they were arrested along with hundreds of others during a historically extraordinary period of government violence and repression, one which has not ended. We concluded quickly that they were not arrested for money, and money was not going to get them released. Also, trying to pay a bribe no one is asking for is a very dangerous strategy.

Tarek built the Canada-Gaza academic exchange by quietly going about the medical and teaching work, without much fanfare or publicity. The decision to go high-profile meant going against Tarek's way of working (as well as his preferences and personality). Once Tarek and John were arrested, though, there was no good low-profile option for getting them out.

Because we were the ones who knew Tarek and John and we could provide both information and responses to events, we used our own media (the podur.org blog, the tarekandjohn.com website set up by John's sister Cecilia Greyson, a dedicated FB group that other supporters had initiated, and the

twitter feeds @natalielovesey, @justinpodur, and @cgreyson). By assuring that our own information appeared first at these places, we were able to ensure that what the media got was accurate.

The media response was beyond what anyone could have hoped. The unique combination of a humanitarian doctor and a well-respected filmmaker, both totally innocent, and accused of bizarre crimes, seemed to create a totally non-partisan consensus in Canada, while the story became an important note in US, UK, and international coverage of the Egyptian regime's post-coup massacres. A record of all of this coverage is at www.tarekandjohn.com.

Because we had so much media attention, we were able to quickly correct misinformation that was put out by the Egyptian prosecutor or ministry of foreign affairs. In the early days, the prosecutor put out a statement saying he was investigating two Canadians, as well as a group of other foreigners, for a range of bizarre accusations. This statement was sent to the Egyptian press, and sent to us by our friends in Egypt. Another friend of Tarek and John's translated it within 20 minutes, so we had an idea of the allegations well before most of the non-Arabic media did. Once we got the sense that this list of allegations was starting to reach the Canadian press, we prepared our own response on podur.org (<http://podur.org/node/1026>).

We emphasized the difference between the legal process and the prosecutor's statement. These were not 'charges', but preventive detention while the prosecutor investigated them for these charges. Charges hadn't been laid, indeed they never were, and we wanted to make sure that was completely clear at every stage. At every stage, we insisted on using the word 'allegations' or 'accusations', instead of 'charges', which implied that charges had been laid.

The first phase ended when Tarek and John went before the prosecutor after 15 days. We were confident that at that point the prosecutor would drop his investigation and release them. Instead, first he did not show up, and days later when he did, he simply renewed their detention another 15 days. We were very disappointed, but we certainly were more difficult to fool after that first renewal.

Phase two: The hunger strike

Media efforts continued, the change.org petition continued to grow, and statements of support came in from many quarters. Atom Egoyan and Arsinee Khanjian produced a video statement that inspired an idea of using the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) to raise the profile of the case. Atom Egoyan and Sarah Polley, among others, helped organize a very successful press conference at TIFF about Tarek and John, as well as a letter signed by many famous Hollywood artists. We also organized with friends in every city where people knew Tarek and John for delegations to visit Egyptian Embassies and consulates to ask about Tarek and John's case. Eventually Delhi, Seoul, New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin all had delegations, while Washington DC and London faced stonewalling by the Egyptian Embassies there.

Several issues arose at this time, where we made decisions whose logic we should explain.

Don't feed the trolls. At around this time, some right-wing columns and hateful comments started to appear in the media. Our strategy was to divide the media into what we called legitimate and “troll” media organizations. Right-wing blogs and Sun Media we considered to be trolls. We decided that we would answer directly and factually anything that appeared in a legitimate media outlet (CTV-Bell-Globe media, CBC, Toronto Star, CP, or major international media). Even within a legitimate media source like the Globe and Mail, we did not see the need to spend much time answering the ravings of plagiarist columnists. We followed the directive: don't feed the trolls.

There are no professionals. Another issue that arose was the idea of hiring professionals – lawyers or public relations professionals – to lead the effort. We decided against this, because there is actually no professional competency in what we were trying to do: manage a specific Canadian media and government context while maintaining contact with a specific human rights community in Egypt and trying to navigate a pro-military political context there, in order to get a prominent cultural figure and a humanitarian doctor out of an Egyptian jail, where they were innocent of any crime. Getting any public relations professional or lawyer up to speed on all this would be a difficult task in itself.

What we looked for, instead, was people who knew Tarek and John and were highly invested in their getting out of jail, for personal or principled reasons. In this extraordinarily large group of people, a wide range of skills and talents presented themselves – including legal, public relations, graphic design, web design, research, and much more – and we tried to use those to the fullest extent possible. There were times when we called on professionals – for the TIFF press conference, and managing media for Tarek and John's return, for example, Touchwood PR volunteered their services. But we did not put professionals in charge of the decision-making.

Fundraising only if you need it. Some eager supporters offered to organize fundraising efforts. Because Tarek is a physician and John a filmmaker, we did not feel that we should be asking people for funds in the short-term. People who donate funds can sometimes feel that they need to do nothing more. Many of the trolls simply assumed that the government was paying the bills. It was not. We wanted supporters to write letters and take other actions, which we felt would be more important. In a context where we did not need funds, we did not want any of the energy of our supporters to go to fundraising efforts.

Public efforts can help back channels. Also at around this time, while we were simultaneously trying every back channel and doing everything we could to raise the profile of the case, we started to get offers by people with “high level contacts” to make back channel efforts on our behalf. We asked people to hold off at first, because we knew the prosecutor would argue that the judiciary was independent and attempts at political influence were unwelcome. As it became clearer and clearer (not to us, to whom it was clear all along, but to the public) that the case was 100% political, we told every supporter with a back channel to pursue it – with very specific instructions: to argue that Tarek and John were completely innocent and that their imprisonment was serving only to ruin Egypt's reputation, as Egypt was being seen as a country that can arbitrarily detain people.

Our back-channelers eventually sorted into several groups. One group, by far the largest, was out there, sincerely using up favours in order to try to make something happen behind the scenes.

Another group tried to claim that they had more extensive contacts than they actually did, and fed us

either ministry of foreign affairs propaganda lines or publicly available information. This second group had varied motivations, but we have learned that they arise inevitably in situations like these. They can be dangerous if they are not identified. In some cases, they might ask supporters to stand down their public efforts to let the back channels work. This is usually a mistake, and in our case, it would have been a severe mistake. We decided that a strong public campaign would give those making the behind-the-scenes arguments a stronger bargaining position, to say: please, let them out quietly, so that this public campaign for their release can end.

A third group (at least two belonged in this category) were the “rainmakers”: people who approached and offered a back channel way out, claimed they were doing it, and tried to guess when release would occur. Presumably, had they guessed right, or won us over to their approach, they may have been able to benefit somehow.

While the second and third categories were potentially harmful, the first category was important – although we will never know how important.

In jail, Tarek and John prepared for a renewal of their detention on day 30. We, too, were not anticipating good news after the first 15-day renewal. Shortly after the 30-day renewal came, we received the message that Tarek and John were on hunger strike.

Phase three: the war of words

The most intense phase followed. Because we were unable to communicate with Tarek and John, with only very poor communication through the Canadian Embassy and almost no lawyer visits, we had very little information about their hunger strike. We knew they were taking juice, but we didn't know whether they were going to have adequate electrolytes, how they planned to come off hunger strike, what would trigger them coming off of it, etc. That Tarek was a physician was somewhat reassuring, but concerns remained. We did not know enough about the political or medical aspects of the strike, but we knew that once we heard about it, we had to announce it. Prisoners who go on hunger strike are taking action, trying to take some agency for themselves in a situation where their agency is being systematically deprived from them. As their supporters, tasked with communicating on their behalf, we had a duty to announce their strike and support them in their efforts.

It was only some time after we heard about their hunger strike that we managed to get a letter from them. They had written many such letters (before and since), but we received only the one. We wrote letters back, of which they also received only one (of mine), and very few others from their families. Their letter contained, finally, some details about their arrest (most of which confirmed our suspicions of what they were doing when they were arrested and before), their thinking about how we could support them, and their ideas about how they thought we should raise the profile of their case. We had already done almost all of what they had mentioned and more, but the details of their arrest and their own statement in their own words were very powerful. We knew that if we released that, it would take the pressure on the Egyptian regime to a higher level, and we hesitated about it, knowing that it was risky.

At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), we heard that Minister Baird met with the Egyptian head of the MFA. The next day, the MFA announced that they were planning to charge Tarek and John with espionage, that they had found sophisticated equipment in their hotel room, including “memory sticks” with footage showing them participating in the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations, and that the charges were impending.

This statement by the MFA removed our hesitation. We published Tarek and John's statement, including the details of their abuse at the hands of their captors, and changed the tone of our campaign to one that was critical of the entire rotten judicial system of the dictatorship, its ridiculous standards of evidence, its violent and arbitrary behavior, its manufactured evidence, and lies. We linked the story of how the Egyptian police arrested a stork for a GPS unit on its leg (the poor stork was later killed). We asked publicly whether there would be consequences for Canada-Egypt relations if Egypt continued this arbitrary detention, and we began to research where some of these consequences might be.

One obvious consequence could be making it difficult for Egyptian officials to appear in public in Canada without having to face questions about Tarek and John. When we learned that Egypt's Deputy PM, Ziad Bahaa Eldine, was visiting Toronto, we published the news and tried to find out where he would be so that we, and the media, could ask him questions. He ended up claiming he was on a “private visit” and not making any public appearances.

One interesting disagreement we on the outside had with Tarek and John on the inside was, Tarek and John always demanded that the Egyptian government charge them or release them. Minister Baird, Minister Yelich, and Prime Minister Harper also eventually made similar calls. We did not want the government to charge them, however, because we believed that the Egyptian government was more than capable of manufacturing evidence (with the “memory sticks”, we saw it happening before our eyes¹²), so looking for a “day in court” with a capricious judicial system was something we wanted to avoid at all costs. It would also likely result in at least several months further detention. Tarek and John, who doubted the possibility of early release, thought being able to move to a trial and end the fully arbitrary detention would have been an improvement. For us, it would have been a more dangerous phase. We believed we had context that they did not have, so we kept pushing for immediate release and, indeed, asked Canadian officials to stop asking for charges to be laid, as the Egyptian government's charges would have no credibility in this case. In Egyptian practice, a case will not go to trial until the equivalent of one-third of the potential sentence has been served. So, if Tarek and John had been up on charges that carry a 10-year sentence, they could easily have been awaiting trial for 3+ years.

Phase four: Egypt's interests

12 The “memory sticks” had an obvious logical problem. Tarek and John were arrested after the demonstrations of August 16, trying to return to their hotel room. The “memory sticks” found by the police supposedly had footage and photos from the August 16th protests and proof that Tarek and John attended. How could Tarek and John, while in police custody, have gotten these “memory sticks” to their hotel room? The question was never answered.

After the 45-day renewal, which we had anticipated, we began also to work on raising the case in the Egyptian media. Because we had managed to create a problem for Egypt in Canada, the message in the Egyptian media would not be, please leave these humanitarians alone, they were just recording and doing medical aid at a demonstration. Our Egyptian friends believed this would not work, as the Egyptian military dictatorship had brazenly killed people on television with significant public and nearly consensus media support. Instead, we used the argument that this detention was so unpopular in the West that it was adversely affecting Egypt's interests.

Since this was the argument that would tell in Egypt, we began looking at how we might continue to affect Egypt's interests. We prepared a campaign against tourism to Egypt for its main sources of tourism in Germany and the UK. We were researching bilateral connections between Canada and Egypt, for example through Export Development Canada (EDC). We were researching billionaires like Naguib Sawaris, heavily politically connected, who makes money in Canada¹³. We were looking at Canadian investments in Egypt, including Agrium's facility and several oil minors like Transglobe Energy. We had planned a global day of action for October 16, with activities in many Canadian cities and a few European and US cities.

The Canadian government continued to strengthen its position on the case, with PM Harper calling for their release and Minister Baird warning of consequences for Canada-Egypt relations. Quebec's National Assembly had passed a strong and unanimous motion calling for immediate release. A motion was prepared for when Canadian Parliament resumed, and a unanimous resolution had been passed at Toronto's City Hall.

Tarek and John were released early in this phase, on October 6, 50 days after they were jailed. After another false start at the airport, they were given clearance to fly and got back to Canada on October 11. In that intervening week, those of us who had been emergency contacts and spokespeople consciously decided to take a giant step backwards, to allow Tarek and John to speak for themselves.

Conclusions

At every stage of the effort, there were those who told us that it was now time to quiet down. That in spite of our efforts, or because of them, things were going to get better for Tarek and John, and that it was time for us to stop trying to pressure Egypt, since pressure could make them angry and make them harm Tarek and John. Inside the jail, Tarek and John were getting the same message. A public struggle like this is most difficult because of this: a dictatorship, or indeed any state, has the power to do harm and when it does you harm, it will do its best to make you think it was your fault, that you brought that harm on to yourself, and that if you would surrender and comply as you are told to, the harm would stop.

13 Sawaris, through complicated business arrangements, was once the owner of WIND Mobile. He has recently pledged to never do business with Canada again:
<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/83973/Business/Economy/Egyptian-telecoms-tycoon-tells-Canada-hes-no-spy;--.aspx>

We believed that if we stopped, even if we stopped escalating, Tarek and John would be much more likely to disappear into a hole than if we kept up. We believed this because we disregarded a great deal of the advice that told us to be quiet. We had to be careful, of course, with how we went about our efforts. But we were conscious that the lowest risk option was not necessarily to remain quiet, and that the longer Tarek and John were in jail, the greater the risk. As a consequence, trying to bring pressure to bear might seem high-risk, but in fact it was the safer of the options, because Tarek and John were only truly safe once they were released.

A final note about media. Activists try to raise wide-ranging social issues and policies, and are used to being ignored by the media. The media, by contrast, are best at covering human interest stories at an individual scale, and find activist issues and discussion hopelessly abstract. But once there is a story that is likely to generate wide public interest, the media feel the need to have access to the sources of that story, and may cover a story properly if they are given good sources and good information. While sources try to cultivate relationships with journalists, journalists do the same. Relations may seem very friendly, but it is worth remembering that interests are different – the journalist wants to be the first to publish the story, while the source usually wants the best and widest possible dissemination. Understanding these interests and differences in approach can help activists navigate media in difficult and complex situations.

There is an adage that victory has many parents, but defeat is an orphan. The effort to free Tarek and John was a collective one that involved at least 150,000 people. Most of these were petition-signers, hundreds did more, and at least a few hundred did much more. For those who find themselves in the middle of any similar successful effort, it is worth remembering that credit is free. More than that, it is impossible to tell whose efforts actually worked, and whose did not. So there is nothing lost in crediting everyone who helped. On the other hand, there is much lost in being ungrateful in these moments. Tarek and John were helped in a very non-partisan way from many quarters, and they were appropriately gracious in their thanks and humble in their acknowledgement of mistakes.

Much of what happened in the past two months will not generalize to new situations. But we think some of our attitudes helped, especially the attitude that ignored those that told us to be quiet. If we can share anything from this experience, we would choose to share that.

Justin Podur was Tarek and John's emergency contact. Dan Freeman-Maloy was one of the organizers of support efforts.

For media requests relating to the case, including to interview Tarek and John, please contact press@touchwoodpr.com.