



Houses of the
Oireachtas
Tithe an
Oireachtais

Parliamentary Visit to Cairo

9 – 13 January 2017

REPORT OF THE DELEGATION

CUMANN PARLAIMINTEACH NA hÉIREANN
IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION

1. INTRODUCTION

A Delegation from the Oireachtas led by Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Feargháil TD, visited the Arab Republic of Egypt from 9-13 January 2017, at the invitation of H.E. Dr Ali Abdel Aal, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Egypt.

The purpose of the visit was to discuss parliamentary relations and foster bilateral cooperation in the areas of foreign relations, communications, agriculture, trade, transport and tourism, and to raise the case of Ibrahim Halawa, who has been detained in prison in Egypt awaiting trial since August 2013.

The programme for the visit included meetings with the Egyptian President, H.E. Abdel Fattah El Sissi, the Speaker of the Egyptian parliament, the Minister for Trade and Industry, the Minister for Aviation, the Minister for Agriculture and the Secretary General of the Arab League, among others. The Delegation also visited Ibrahim Halawa during their stay in Cairo. Meetings were also held with human rights activists and representatives of civil society. However, at their request, details of these meetings have not been included in this report.

The Delegation consisted of the following members:

Ceann Comhairle, Seán Ó Fearghail, TD
Darragh O'Brien, TD (Fianna Fáil), Party spokesperson on Foreign Affairs
Colm Brophy, TD (Fine Gael)
Brendan Howlin, TD (Labour), Leader of the Labour Party
Paul Murphy, TD (Anti Austerity Alliance-People Before Profit)
Eoin Ó Broin, TD (Sinn Féin)
Eamon Ryan, TD (Green Party), Leader of the Green Party
Noel Grealish TD (Rural Independent Group)

The Delegation was accompanied by Mr. Peter Finnegan, Clerk of the Dáil, Mr. John Hamilton, Head of Inter-parliamentary Relations and Mr. Brian Prunty, Private Secretary to the Ceann Comhairle. For the duration of the visit in Cairo, the Delegation was also accompanied by Mr. Damien Cole, Ireland's Ambassador to Egypt, Mr. Vincent Herlihy, Deputy Head of Mission and Mr. Shane Gleeson, Consul, Embassy of Ireland, Cairo.

The invitation to visit Egypt was received following intensive discussions between the Ceann Comhairle and H.E. Soha Gendi, Ambassador of Egypt to Ireland. These discussions were in the context of the resolution of Dáil Éireann of 7 July 2016, which, inter alia, called for the release of Ibrahim Halawa, for a

parliamentary delegation to visit the Egyptian parliament and to visit Ibrahim Halawa in prison. The Ceann Comhairle would like to sincerely thank Ambassador Gendi for her invaluable assistance, without which the visit may not have been possible. The Delegation would also like to thank the Egyptian Authorities for the open and friendly manner in which the Delegation was received and treated during their stay in Cairo.

The Ceann Comhairle and members of the Delegation would also like to record their appreciation for the assistance given by Ireland's diplomats in preparing for and in the course of the visit, notably -

- Damien Cole, Ireland's Ambassador to Egypt
- Vincent Herlihy, Deputy Head of Mission, Cairo
- Shane Gleeson, Consul, Embassy of Ireland, Cairo
- Sihan Charles, Advisor, Embassy of Ireland, Cairo
- Adrian O'Neill, Second Secretary General, Dept. of Foreign Affairs
- Ciarán Madden, Director, Dept. of Foreign Affairs
- Colm O Conaill, Deputy Director, Consular Division, Dept of Foreign Affairs

2. Visit with Ibrahim Halawa, Wadi Al Natroun prison

The Delegation travelled to Wadi Al Natroun prison, outside Cairo, to visit Ibrahim Halawa. The General Manager of Wadi Al Natroun prison welcomed the Delegation and the visit took place in his office.

The visit with Mr Halawa took place in the presence of the General Manager and several of his staff. The Ceann Comhairle opened the meeting by outlining to Mr Halawa the purpose of the visit to Cairo and the concerns expressed by members of the Delegation about his trial and detention. He inquired about his health and welfare, the conditions in prison, and other issues of concern to him. The Delegation also sought to reassure Mr Halawa that his case was receiving the attention of the Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and, in addition to the concern of Members of the Oireachtas, that there was considerable media and public interest in his case.

Mr Halawa, who was in good spirits, spoke of the conditions in the prison and of the treatment he had received. He said that it was unacceptable that he be held for over 3 years and that there was no evidence of wrongdoing against him. He explained that his cell was shared with 10 other detainees and the consequent lack of privacy and difficulty in sleeping. He described episodes of maltreatment and periods of solitary confinement, denial of medical treatment and curtailed family visits. He complained of numbness in his right arm and added that a cardiology test ordered by the prison doctor 3 months previously still had not been arranged. He told the Delegation that he was currently on hunger strike, taking only water and glucose injections. He stressed that he had no interest in the Egyptian political situation and that his greatest wish was to return home to Ireland to his family and to continue his education.

The Delegation collectively urged Mr. Halawa to stop his hunger strike in the interests of his health and wellbeing. The Ceann Comhairle agreed to raise the concerns expressed by Mr Halawa in relation to health and welfare issues with the appropriate Egyptian authorities.

The meeting concluded and the Ceann Comhairle thanked the General Manager for facilitating the visit.

3. Egyptian Parliament: Speaker of the House of Representatives, H.E. Ali Abdel Aal

The Delegation visited the Egyptian Parliament for a meeting with H.E. Ali Abdel Aal, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Also attending the meeting were the Deputy Speaker, Dr. El Sayed Mahmoud El Sharief, Chairs of Parliamentary Committees and senior officials of Parliament.

Noting that the day was the first anniversary of the first plenary session of the new Egyptian Parliament, the Speaker welcomed the Delegation as his honoured guests to the Arab Republic of Egypt. He looked forward to the further development of parliamentary relations and to the establishment of respective parliamentary friendship groups. He welcomed endeavours by both countries to strengthen trade and investment links in the areas of pharmaceuticals, medical services and aviation. The Speaker also referred to the challenges currently facing Egypt, such as the stability of the region, the fight against terrorism and curbing illegal migration, economic difficulties and helping the marginalised of society.

In response, the Ceann Comhairle thanked the Speaker for the generous invitation to visit his country. The genuinely warm welcome received was an indication of the long-standing friendship between Ireland and Egypt. He noted the striking similarities between the two countries, from the shared colonial past to economic challenges and security concerns. He stated that in travelling to Egypt, the Delegation had two objectives, the first of which was to build stronger parliamentary and bi-lateral relations. He commended H.E. Soha Gendi, Egypt's ambassador to Ireland for her hard work and tireless efforts to further bilateral relations. In this context, he was pleased to extend an invitation to the Speaker to visit Ireland in the near future.

The second objective of the visit was to raise the case of Ibrahim Halawa. The Delegation was extremely grateful for the level of access which had been provided and the Ceann Comhairle appealed to the Egyptian side to show strength in mercy in the Halawa case.

During the ensuing discussions, while sympathising with the sentiments expressed by the Irish side, the Speaker and his parliamentary colleagues reiterated that the Egyptian constitution stipulated non-interference in judicial affairs. However, it was emphasised that the judiciary was fair and neutral and that Ibrahim Halawa would be well treated until his case is finalised. The Delegation and the Irish Parliament were commended for the concern shown for one of its citizens. The Chair of the Human Rights Committee added that the Halawa case was a priority for the Committee and it was calling for the early end to the trial so that Ibrahim could return home.

In closing the meeting, the Speaker looked forward to an early conclusion to the Halawa case, the development and strengthening of cooperation between the two countries and to visiting Ireland in the near future.

4. President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, H.E. Abdel Fattah El Sissi

The Delegation was honoured to meet with the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, H.E. Abdel Fattah El Sissi. At the outset, the Ceann Comhairle recorded

his appreciation to the Egyptian President and his government for the open and friendly manner in which the Delegation had been received and in particular, in facilitating the visit to Wadi Al Natroun prison to visit Ibrahim Halawa. In this regard, the Ceann Comhairle also commended the work of H.E. Soha Gendi, Ambassador of Egypt to Ireland.

The Ceann Comhairle also spoke of the affinity between the Irish and Egyptian people and the need, particularly in challenging times, to develop and maintain good relations. While the purpose of the Delegation's visit was to develop parliamentary relations and foster bilateral cooperation, the Delegation specifically wished to raise the case of Ibrahim Halawa, who had been detained on trial in Egypt since August 2013. He stressed that the visit was not and should not be viewed as interference in the judicial process of another sovereign state. The Delegation did however wish to raise a number of concerns in relation to the case, in particular, the age of Mr Halawa when first detained (as a 17 year old, Mr Halawa was a minor), his Irish and EU citizenship, his health and well-being, and the ongoing delays in his trial. The Ceann Comhairle urged the President to use the powers at his disposal to secure the early release of Mr. Halawa and return him to Ireland. He added that Ibrahim Halawa's ongoing detention was creating a negative perception towards Egypt with the Irish public and in the Irish media.

In his opening remarks, President Sissi directly addressed the case of Ibrahim Hawala, stating that if it were within his power to release him, he would have done so when An Taoiseach first contacted him about the case. However, he stressed that under the Egyptian constitution, he cannot and will not interfere in the proceedings of the trial or influence its outcome until a final verdict is reached by the court. However, the President assured the Delegation that he would use the powers* available to him to ensure that Ibrahim Halawa was returned safely to Ireland once the trial had concluded.

The President added that there was a concern among the Egyptian public in relation to the ongoing delays in trials such as in the Halawa case. He advised that the Egyptian parliament is considering legislation to address this problem and he urged the Delegation to pursue this issue with the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

[The Delegation understands that the Egyptian President could consider authorising Mr. Halawa's release either through a Presidential pardon or under the Presidential decree law 140, after the court process has concluded and a verdict is confirmed. The Presidential Decree (number 140/2014) provides for the President of Egypt to use discretionary power to order the transfer of defendants or convicted prisoners to their home countries, subject to certain conditions having been met and where such action is in Egypt's national interests. There is also a Detained Youth Amnesty Scheme which operates*

under Article 155 of the Egyptian Constitution. Article 155 relates to the Presidential Pardon mechanism whereby the President has the power, having consulted with the cabinet, to set aside convictions or mitigate sentences. Article 155 does not give the President the power to intervene in the judicial process or release prisoners who have not been convicted.]

Moving on, the President emphasised that Egypt values developing relations with Ireland and especially at the parliamentary level. He stressed that the developments within Egypt in the recent past reflect the Egyptian people's will to build a modern civic state based on the values of the democracy and supremacy of law as well as rejecting extremist thought. The President also spoke of the challenges facing the Egyptian Government at this time. In addition to the security concerns and the need to provide stability both in Egypt and the wider region, there are also challenges in providing for the more basic needs of the people of Egypt including the provision of food, employment and education. The economic and financial situation had deteriorated quite severely and required an IMF intervention. The conditionality attached to the IMF loan could provide challenges to social stability, a view which was shared by members of the Delegation.

In relation to security concerns, the ongoing unrest in Northern Sinai and the recent suicide bombing of the Coptic cathedral emphasised the need for vigilance. The President expressed his gratitude to the Delegation for the condolences offered in respect of the deaths of Egyptian soldiers in Northern Sinai. He especially welcomed the plans of the Delegation to visit the Coptic Cathedral in order for the Delegation to pay its respects to those who died in attack.

5. Meeting with Deputy Head of Homeland Security, General Mahmoud Tawfik

The Delegation met with the Deputy Head of Homeland Security, General Mahmoud Tawfik (in the absence of General Al Sharawi). The Homeland Security Department has responsibility for the governance and administration of the prison system within Egypt. General Tawfik was accompanied by General Ahmed (responsible for Counter Terrorism), General Hisham (International Cooperation), General Adel (Foreign Relations), General Hazem (Domestic Monitoring Parliamentary Affairs) and other officials.

At the outset, the Ceann Comhairle said that while the purpose of the Delegation's visit to Cairo was to enhance and develop parliamentary relations, the Delegation also wished to raise the case of Ibrahim Halawa. The Ceann Comhairle recorded the Delegation's appreciation of the manner in which the visit to Wadi Al Natroun prison had been facilitated. He again stressed that the

Delegation's visit to Egypt should not be viewed as interference in the judicial process of another sovereign state and that the Delegation understood that the President would not intervene until the trial concludes. The Delegation was concerned however about Ibrahim Halawa's welfare and sought assurances that his welfare while in prison would be protected. The Ceann Comhairle then outlined the concerns which had been related to them by Ibrahim Halawa, including alleged episodes of maltreatment, periods of solitary confinement, denial of medical treatment and curtailed family visits.

In response, General Tawfik stated that he was aware of the high profile afforded to the case and he assured the Delegation that Ibrahim Halawa's welfare while in prison would be guaranteed. In any event the General stated that his officials would follow up on the specific concerns raised with the prison authorities. The General denied that any mistreatment had taken place and suggested that prisoners often invent or exaggerate such concerns. Regarding health issues, he stated that Ibrahim Halawa had been examined by a doctor who found him in good health, with no requirement for further tests regarding a heart condition. However, a further examination would be ordered. General Ahmed added that Mr. Halawa had been visited 11 times by his family since the start of November 2016, that he had regular consular visits and that visits are covered by security cameras. Mr. Halawa was also subject to rigorous medical examinations every 15 days and the prison authorities had provided 3 separate medical reports indicating that he was in good health.

General Tawfik confirmed that his officials would continue to co-ordinate with the consular staff of the Embassy of Ireland in providing consular assistance to Mr Halawa.

The discussion with General Tawfik and his colleagues also addressed the significant security challenges for Egypt. Combating terrorism in Egypt and the Middle East is a priority and the Egyptian authorities are open to assistance (e.g. exchange of information, expertise and the provision of equipment) from other countries, especially those countries like Ireland who have had similar experiences. Regarding the potential for human rights abuses, the view expressed by the General and his staff was that there is a direct relationship between human rights and stability. Respect for human rights is an essential element of a stable society, but in challenging times every person has a duty to respect the law. Continuous oversight of the security system is also required to ensure respect for human rights.

6. Meeting with Minister for Trade and Industry, H.E. Tarel Kabil

The Delegation met with the Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr. Tarel Kabil. The Minister, a former businessman and President of the Middle East division of

Pepsi-Cola, was accompanied by several advisors and officials. The meeting focussed on the current economic situation in Egypt and the opportunities for developing bilateral trade. The Minister explained that following recent political and civil unrest and related terrorist activities, there had been a significant reduction of revenues and a near collapse of the tourism industry, and consequently the economic and financial situation had deteriorated quite severely. An IMF loan was applied for and eventually granted in early November. The loan was accompanied by a 50% devaluation of the national currency and major tax increases and subsidy cuts, but is likely to ease problems in the short term. However, 75% of the budget is expended on salaries, debt repayments and food subsidies.

On a positive note, both sides agreed that the traditionally strong relationship between Ireland and Egypt provided a platform on which to build mutually beneficial trade opportunities in the areas of health, education, agriculture and ICT. A recent development was a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Healthcare allowing for expertise exchanges between the Irish & Egyptian health systems. Further bilateral contact at an inter-parliamentary level could assist in fostering similar developments. However, the Delegation did refer to the negative publicity surrounding the Ibrahim Halawa case, which, unresolved, could be an impediment to the further development of trade in the short term.

7. Meeting with Reinhold Brender, Acting Head of Delegation, European External Action Service,

The Delegation met with Reinhold Brender, Acting Head of Delegation, European External Action Service in Egypt, for a discussion on the current situation within Egypt and its relations with the EU. The assessment of the EEAS is that the situation had stabilised since the 2013 unrest which followed the removal of President Morsi. The new regime had successfully implemented its three part roadmap to democracy - a referendum on the constitution, Presidential elections and Parliamentary elections. The number of terrorist incidents had reduced over time, with the exception of the Northern Sinai area, where unrest continues. The EU continues to raise human rights concerns with Egypt, including the role of Civil Society, arbitrary detentions and the death penalty. The EU continues to consider Egypt to be an indispensable partner which plays a central role in stabilising the region, and stemming the flow of migration.

Regarding the Ibrahim Halawa case, the Delegation requested the EEAS to attend his trial as an observer. Both the EEAS and Ambassador Cole stressed that there is a high level of EU interest in the Halawa case which is very helpful.

8. Meeting with Minister for Agriculture Dr. Essam Osman Fayed

The Delegation met with the Minister for Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Dr. Essam Osman Fayed and his officials for a discussion on the opportunities for bilateral trade and cooperation in the areas of agriculture and agri-food. The Ceann Comhaire noted that Egypt had historically been a major export market for Irish beef and agri-food exports. He and the other members of the Delegation welcomed the recent announcement that an agreement had been reached with the Egyptian authorities for the re-opening of the Egyptian market to Irish beef - a market which had been closed to Ireland since 1997. The Delegation also looked forward to the re-establishment of live-cattle trade links.

Following a discussion on food sciences, food safety and related research, it was agreed that the establishment of lines of cooperation between the Agricultural Research and Food Safety Institutions in both countries could be mutually beneficial. Ambassador Cole undertook to follow up on this issue with the respective authorities in both countries.

Regarding the case of Ibrahim Halawa, the Minister confirmed that he was familiar with the case and would discuss it with cabinet colleagues, the Prime Minister and the President.

9. H.E. Ahmed Abou El Gleit, Secretary General of the Arab League

The Delegation met with H.E. Ahmed Abou El Gleit, Secretary General of the Arab League. The Secretary General is a former Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs (Egypt) and Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations.

The League of Arab States (LAS) is a regional organisation bringing together 22 Arab countries, with the purpose of promoting and strengthening political, economic, cultural, scientific and social cooperation among its members. Based in Cairo, it is a largely political/foreign policy-focused organisation, which has traditionally had a strong Egyptian contingent in its leadership, and tends to closely shadow Egyptian foreign policies.

At the outset, the Secretary General refused to be drawn on the Halawa case, stating that it was an internal matter for a sovereign Arab state. He did add that the Egyptian judicial system was very slow and advised the Delegation to keep working but to have patience. He commended the Delegation and the Oireachtas for its support of Ibrahim Halawa, which would be viewed positively by the Muslim community in Ireland and demonstrate that Muslims can be accepted and integrated into Irish society.

Regarding securing support for Ireland's candidature for membership of the UN Security Council, he advised the Delegation to undertake further bilateral visits to Arab countries. Ireland is respected in the Arab world, a good deal of which comes from Ireland's involvement in peacekeeping missions in the Middle East, particularly Lebanon. Early formal recognition by Ireland of the state of Palestine would also be viewed positively by the Arab world.

On the West's relationship with the Arab world, the Secretary General cautioned that rebuilding societies in your own image is not the proper way. Attempting to alter the dynamics of a society in such a way will create chaos. What is required is help, support, dealing with injustice and above all patience.

10. Meeting with Minister for Aviation Sherif Fathi Attia

The Ceann Comhairle, along with Deputies Eamon Ryan and Darragh O'Brien and Ambassador Cole met with the Minister for Aviation. The Minister was accompanied by the Speaker of Parliament and the Chair of the Tourism Committee. The meeting focussed on the need to bring the Ireland/Egypt Air Services Agreement into force, to provide for code-share agreements between Egyptair and Aer Lingus on routes to Egypt, and subsequently fifth freedom rights for stopovers in Dublin or Shannon on North American routes. Both sides agreed this could be a valuable and mutually beneficial trade opportunity for Ireland and Egypt. The Ceann Comhairle undertook to follow up on the ratification of the ASA with the Minister for Transport.

11. Visit to the Coptic Cathedral

While in Cairo, the Delegation visited the Coptic Cathedral, scene of a suicide bombing on 11 December which claimed the lives of 25 people, mostly women and children. The Ceann Comhairle and the Delegation offered condolences to the representative of the Coptic Pope, Bishop Marcos and local clerics Fr. Antonious and Fr. Kirolos. The Delegation also signed the book of condolences and laid a wreath in respect of those who had perished in the attack.

Appendix 1



Meeting with the Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament



Meeting with the the Secretary General of the Arab League



Meeting with the Egyptian President



Paying respects at the Coptic Cathedral



Meeting with the Minister for Trade