

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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**Questions**

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**RESPONSE**

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Cases of arrest, entrapment over the internet, and the torture of homosexuals by Egyptian security personal continued to be reported on into late 2006. These were not at the high levels that occurred during the intense crackdown between the late 1990s and 2004 and involved the highly public Queen Boat arrests and trails of 2001, events which prompted the March 2004 publication by Human Rights Watch (HRW) of *In a Time of Torture: The Assault on Justice in Egypt's Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct*. The reduction in reported cases may be explained, according to a number of reports, by the intentional retreat of homosexuals from overt visibility within Egyptian society, as well as an easing in government action following the HRW publication (events during the period from 1999 to 2004 are covered in RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response EGY17595*, 11 October – Attachment 1; and DIMIA Country Information and Protection Support Section 2005, *Issues Brief: Homosexuals and Transsexuals in Egypt*, September – Attachment 2; for the “underground retreat” of homosexuals after the crackdown, see reports in RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response EGY17595*, 11 October – Attachment 1; and for the government’s response to the HRW 2004 report see references in the recent article (quoted below) by Azimi, N. ‘Prisoners of Sex’ 2006, *The New York Times*, 3 December <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/magazine/03arabs.html?pagewanted=4&th&emc=th> – Accessed 4 December 2006 – Attachment 3).

The most current reports found addressing the situation of homosexuals were published in December 2006 and May 2007. A lengthy article appeared in *The New York Times* in December 2006 titled ‘Prisoners of Sex’ and was included in a previous January 2007 RRT Country Research response on homosexuals in Egypt (RRT Country Research 2007,

*Research Response EGY 31241*, 30 January – Attachment 4). This wide-ranging article refers to a number of different aspects of the situation of homosexuals in Egypt, including: (a) calls by some members of parliament to censor scenes from a 2006 film ‘The Yacoubian Building’ depicting homosexuality acts, a film which nonetheless proved to be popular among the public; (b) the detainment of 11 men in July 2006 for being “conspicuously homosexual”; (c) the recent situation faced by gay men living in the industrial city of Tanta; (d) the views of a medical doctor and advisor to the Ministry of Health working in southern Cairo who counsels homosexual couples; (e) one report of internet entrapment and torture by police in September 2006; and (f) the view of human rights advocates on the possibility of another crackdown in Egypt. The relevant extracts from *The New York Times* article follow:

Mostafa Bakry has a knack for reinventing himself. He is an old-school Arab nationalist, newspaper editor and parliamentarian, and has managed to keep himself in the middle of the Egyptian political scene for almost two decades. He rails against decadence, against corruption — anything that can get the otherwise sleepy Egyptian public excited. **This past July, he took on the issue of homosexuality, introducing a motion in Parliament calling for censorship of several scenes in a popular new film, “The Yacoubian Building,” and denouncing the racier parts of the movie as “spreading obscenity and debauchery.”** One of the central characters in the story — a mosaic of downtown Cairo life complete with political intrigue, love triangles, the specter of extremism and more — is an affluent, dashing, Francophone newspaper editor who happens to be gay. He has an affair with a simple soldier from the countryside, and thus begins a tale of lust that ends in murder.

**There are no gay bars in Cairo, so coffee shops (top and bottom) and the Qasr el-Nil Bridge (center) are popular meeting spots.**

... **In the end, 112 parliamentarians from across the political spectrum signed onto Bakry’s motion. The gesture, however, had little effect. By the beginning of September, the film was still doing well at the box office, and no censorship was in sight.** But it didn’t matter. The parliamentarian had made his point; he had raised the flag of morality, religion and public virtue.

... Egypt’s most famous crackdown got under way at a neon floating disco, the Queen Boat, docked on the wealthy Nile-side island of Zamalek, just steps from the famously gay-friendly Marriott Hotel. In the early-morning hours of May 11, 2001, baton-wielding police officers descended upon the boat, where men were dancing and drinking. Security officials rounded up more than 50 of them — doctors, teachers, mechanics. Those who were kept in custody became known among Egyptians as the Queen Boat 52. The detained men were beaten, bound, tortured; some were even subjected to exams to determine whether they had engaged in anal sex. In the weeks that followed, official, opposition and independent newspapers printed the names, addresses and places of work of the detained. Front pages carried the men’s photographs, not always with black bars across their eyes. The press accused the men of sexual excesses, dressing as women, devil worship, even dubious links to Israel. Bakry’s newspaper, *Al Osboa*, helped lead the charge.

The Queen Boat was just the beginning. Agents of the Department for Protection of Morality, a sort of vice squad within the Ministry of Interior’s national police force, began monitoring suspected gay gathering spots, recruiting informants, luring people into arrest via chat sites on the Internet, tapping phones, raiding homes. **Today, arrests and roundups occur throughout the country, from the Nile Delta towns of Damanhour and Tanta to Port Said along the Suez Canal and into Cairo.**

The city’s central Tahrir Square is a vast plaza with awkward pedestrian islands separated by traffic, lined with a Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Arab League headquarters and the Egyptian

government's hulking bureaucratic headquarters, the Mugamma. On summer evenings, it is full of people. Men whistle at passing women, couples linger, tourists are accosted by the oddly seductive call of "You look like an Egyptian" and hawkers promote their wares — not the least of which is sex. **In early July of this year, 11 men, said to be conspicuously homosexual, were picked up.**

[Tanta]

... Tanta is a drab industrial town on the Nile, halfway between Cairo and the Mediterranean city of Alexandria. With a population of about 350,000, Tanta has a university and a plethora of cotton-gin and oil factories. It is probably best known for its moulid, a gathering celebrating Al-Sayyed Ahmed Al-Badawi, a 13th-century holy man of Moroccan origin credited with being the founder of the Badawiyyah Sufi order. Al Badawi died in Tanta in 1276, and each year in October, just at the end of the cotton harvest, some two million Egyptians descend upon Tanta and Al Badawi's shrine for a week of recitations, performances, dancing and devotion.

The rest of the year Tanta is remarkably quiet. One afternoon in August, I met a young man named Hassan at a baroque, upscale hotel steps away from the shrine. **Though it is difficult to speak of a gay community in Tanta (not all men who sleep with men in Egypt use the term "gay," much less identify themselves as such), Hassan is a ringleader of sorts, a thread between generations.** A youthful 37, he comes from a working-class family — his father runs an auto-parts shop — and he told me, mischievously, that he got out of military service because he is the only son among girls. **For Hassan and many gay men in Tanta, the last few years have been especially hard. "First, there was Shibl's death, then the affair of Ahmed, then Adel's death and the arrests," he explained.**

Shibl was a friend of Hassan's, caught with another man in the baths of the shrine — a gathering ground for many gay men at the time. In 2002 he was beaten so badly in detention that he died of cardiac arrest. Ahmed, another friend, was arrested from his home later that year, accused of having sex with two other men in his flat and "forming a group of Satan worshipers." In prison, he was forced to strip down to his underwear, then was humiliated and beaten to the point of hemorrhaging. After his release, he lost his job as a schoolteacher. One local paper wrote, "A male teacher puts aside all principles and follows his perverted instincts, putting on women's clothes and makeup on his face to seduce men who seek forbidden pleasures."

Adel, a third friend of Hassan's, was killed by an occasional lover. The ensuing investigation, not far removed from a witch hunt, resulted in many suspected homosexuals in Tanta being arrested, including Hassan. He and others arrested told me that they were held in a police interrogation room called "the refrigerator," marked by a carpet brought in by the police that was caked in Adel's blood. Detainees were tortured nightly for more than two weeks, from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m., according to the same sources. Hassan estimates that at least 100 men were detained and tortured. Some men were forced to stand on their tiptoes for those hours; others got electric shocks to the penis and tongue; still others were beaten on the soles of their feet with a rod called a felaqa, to the point of losing consciousness.

Most men were held until they broke, agreeing to work as informants, walking the street to pick up other homosexuals and reporting in each night. "They told us Adel deserved to die," Hassan told me. "They said they wished all gays would die." This went on for at least a month, Hassan and others say, in a pattern of detention, torture, informing, more torture.

[Medical doctor from Behman Hospital]

... Perched on a hill at the end of a windy road in Helwan, an industrial town south of Cairo and once the summer romping ground for the city's well-to-do, is the Behman Hospital. With its pruned bushes and tennis courts, Behman looks more like a country club than a psychiatric institute. Dr. Nasser Loza is the medical director there; he is also an adviser to the Ministry of Health and runs a clinic in the upscale neighborhood of Mohandiseen. I had heard through friends that Loza counsels homosexual couples, so I went looking for him.

"They come in with quite banal relationship problems," Loza told me when we met one afternoon at the hospital. **"They manage to have very normal, quiet lives despite society's negative views about being gay." He added that on average he sees about one new couple every two or three months. "I suppose most are high-level professionals, some are of mixed cultural backgrounds." Loza's patients are the people you hear less of in the din of discussion surrounding homosexuality in this part of the world.** Take M., for example, a successful businessman who was among the 52 arrested on the Queen Boat. He has since moved to the States, and recently wrote me in an e-mail message: "Money gave me security. I met my partner at a dinner party. I could travel. And I didn't have my family on my back because I had moved out. I had a normal life until this happened."

Most often, Loza sees families. "Typically, a family comes in with their son or daughter who has just announced that they are homosexual," Loza explained. "They want me to help. The first reaction on the part of the family is denial, and then incredible blame." In 1990, the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, but Loza told me that "whether it is treated as a disease or not really depends on the doctor." While a combination of counseling and antidepressants seems the norm, you still sometimes hear of the application of electroshock therapy.

... Human Rights Watch avoided laying itself open to easy attack as the bearer of an outsider's agenda, packaging Queen Boat advocacy in the larger context of torture. Many of the arrested men were tortured, and torture is something that, at least in theory, most people agree is a bad thing. In Human Rights Watch's 150-page report on the crackdown, references to religion, homosexual rights or anything else that could be seen or used as code for licentiousness were played down. Torture was played up, and it may very well be the first and last human rights report to cite Michel Foucault's "History of Sexuality." Upon release of the report in March 2004, Kenneth Roth, Human Rights Watch's executive director, and Scott Long, director of the organization's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Project, met with Egypt's public prosecutor, the assistant to the interior minister and members of the Foreign Ministry. **Their effort seemed to have had some effect; although occasional arrests continue, the all-out campaign of arrest and entrapment of men that began with the Queen Boat incident came to an end. One well-connected lawyer noted that a high-ranking Ministry of Interior source told him, "It is the end of the gay cases in Egypt, because of the activities of some human rights organizations."**

When I spoke to Long about his work on the Queen Boat case and its aftermath, he reflected on his advocacy methods in a context in which human rights, and especially gay rights, are increasingly associated with Western empire-building. "Perhaps we had less publicity for the report in the United States because we avoided fetishizing beautiful brown men in Egypt being denied the right to love," he said. "We wrote for an Egyptian audience and tried to make this intelligible in terms of the human rights issues that have been central in Egyptian campaigns. **It may not have made headlines, but it seemed to make history." Whether the effort made history or simply interrupted it remains to be seen. Long himself noted, "The fact that the crackdown came apparently out of nowhere is a reminder that the repression could revive anytime."**

... In Egypt, religiosity — along with an associated emphasis on public involvement in the private sphere — continues to rise. For the 2005 campaign the Muslim Brotherhood listed

beauty pageants, music videos and sexy photographs as issues needing public debate; banning female presenters (even in veils) from state-run television and expanding religious education in public schools were also on the agenda. The brotherhood won 88 seats. **And in most cases, there has been complete impunity for perpetrators of attacks on gay men; individual officers responsible for attacks have been promoted or shuffled around. As recently as September [2006], at least one entrapment case occurred in Cairo; a young man was lured via a chat site and tortured — badly beaten and subject to electroshock on his genitals — by the same office of the public morality squad that had conducted Internet-based entrapments.**

In the meantime, routine scapegoating of the West, and of its real and perceived agendas in the region, seems to be reaching new highs. The Egyptian government, despite its intimate strategic relationship with the U.S., has been increasing its rhetorical assaults on what is blithely reduced to an imperial, meddling West — ostensibly to parade its nationalist credentials in the face of America's disastrous exploits in the Middle East. (In September, Gamal Mubarak, the president's smooth-talking, Western-educated son and heir apparent, went so far as to dismiss Western initiatives designed to foster democratization in the region at a policy conference of the ruling National Democratic Party). Blanket attacks on what is vaguely referred to as "human rights" continue; in late August, Mostafa Bakry's newspaper, *Al Osboa*, assailed Hossam Bahgat's organization, along with an NGO that works on AIDS, for defending "perverts." **The ingredients for another crackdown exist in abundance in Egypt and the region at large** (Azimi, N. 'Prisoners of Sex' 2006, *The New York Times*, 3 December

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/magazine/03arabs.html?pagewanted=4&th&emc=th> – Accessed 4 December 2006 – Attachment 3).

A more narrowly focussed May 2007 article in *The Daily Star – Egypt* discusses the role the internet still plays in encouraging gay men living in the delta of Egypt to meet one another. The article also comments on how this method of encounter has opened up the possibility of violence against homosexuals beyond those perpetrated by state agents, examples of which the interviewees describe. The view that police indicate in their files of prominent individuals that they are homosexual is also expressed. The article concludes by quoting the view of one man that the discretion forced upon homosexual couples by societal attitudes makes it difficult for such relationships to be sustained:

Both men say that stories of homophobic violence and petty mugging are common. Gamal has experienced it first hand.

"Back in a time when I was less careful, years ago, I met someone after chatting just one time," says Gamal. "He seemed to be a good guy – cultured, educated, a university graduate, he had a job, he was good looking. It should have worked fine."

"I met him, and he robbed me, even though I met him in a public place – we met in a shopping mall in Nasser City, in one of the coffee shops on the first floor. It scared the hell out of me – I never expected it to happen."

Working with a partner who made a distraction inside the shop, Gamal's date took off with his expensive new mobile. When Gamal called the man to confront him and ask why he had stolen the phone, the man threatened to tell everyone on his SIM card that he was gay. "You're a fag," he said, "and you deserve what happens to you." Still, Gamal says he was lucky that nothing worse happened.

“I have heard of worse stories, horrible stories of people being mugged and robbed, or tranquilized, drugged and thrown out of cars while driving on the highway,” he says. “There are horrible risks you take with gay chatting and dating here.”

Years of online dating have taught both men a lot about gay life in Egypt, and the perils and possible happiness of a life lived with a little help from the internet world.

Adam met his current boyfriend, Sherif, over the internet. **The two are in a happy, committed relationship and so are predictably not as pessimistic as some about the possibility of gay romance in Cairo. But Adam says that he is acutely aware of the challenges, both personal and professional, of living a gay life in Egypt.**

**“I am involved in a lot of different things,” he says. “In university I was involved in a lot of student activities. I was a leader of a big organization at my university, so State Security knew who I was. Now I am a journalist, so State Security knows who I am. I think the government has it on my file that I am gay, and my biggest fear is that someday they will black-mail me.”**

“It’s hard to think about the future because right now it’s easy for Sherif and I, we’re young,” he says. “But people talk to me about marriage a lot. And what about ten years from now – two 35 year olds living together? And they’re not dating? What’s the story with that?”

Gamal, who is currently single, says that his years of online dating have made him pessimistic about gay life in Egypt.

**There is too much hostility to homosexuality, he says, too little respect for people’s private lives, and too much pressure to follow the acceptable path of sexual chastity until heterosexual marriage. Egyptian society does not leave any space for people like he and Adam to live their own lives, he says.**

“Since I started dating through the internet, I’ve had 3 serious relationships,” says Gamal. “Two were with Egyptians and one was with an American. But they were all failures, of course. None of them worked. I don’t think it is possible for two guys in Egypt to stay together for the long term. **Everything is against it here – it’s taboo, it’s illegal, it’s forbidden.**”

**“You have to be discrete, and discretion is one major element that makes everything fall apart, that makes it break up,” he adds, his voice more resigned than sad. “If you’re going to share a life together people have to know about it. But you can’t do that here, so everything always falls apart”** (Stack, L. 2007 ‘For Gay Egyptians, Life Online is the Only Choice’, *The Daily Star – Egypt*, 18 May <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7281> – Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 5).

A final report refers to the level of harassment against homosexuals, as well as to a re-emergent active gay life, in large centres such as Cairo and Alexandria in early 2006. The GobaGayz website contains an account by a foreigner, Richard Ammon, of his perceptions of gay life in Egypt following a month’s vacation. Written apparently over a two year period beginning in 2004, the account also includes a piece of correspondence written in 2006 by Aristotle (or Ari), a young homosexual man from Alexandria. After recounting details of his arrest and jailing by police for two months in 2002, Ari goes on to describe the current situation for homosexuals in Cairo and Alexandria:

In early 2006 he [Ari] sent the following more upbeat note: **The gay and lesbian life is again active in Cairo and Alexandria but with differences.** My boyfriend works in a school mainly for foreigners and the ‘cream of the society’. He has many colleagues who are gay and lesbian too - about a dozen.

“I was invited with him to a dinner once with a lesbian couple and four other men, in Maadi (a quiet neighborhood and a luxurious place) where gay parties and birthdays are done on weekends for a simple reason: **they are low-key and private and not open to just anyone.** You do find queens invited with full make-up on their faces and this implies what is happening.

**“There is still harassment going on but at a very low scale for now and in a different way. An arrested person or couple are taken to the police station and are beaten a bit and stay there overnight or for 3 days then released but no reports are done. I haven’t heard such a new case since November [2005].**

“In Alexandria it is different; everyone knows everyone (I mean gays). They meet in many occasions. I went once with three friends celebrating a feast and went to a mall. Suddenly we turned to a cafe to greet some friends and there were over 25 guys sitting together in a circle and occupying a quarter of the Cafe.

“I shook hands with a few then escaped away; I couldn’t handle such a thing and felt as if I was fainting but again everyone was friendly. They are always curious to know who is the new face.

“I think if you come once more to Egypt, you will have a totally different view. **However, we gays are benefiting of this relative freeness because it is in a low key, even when we are sitting in a cafe and discussing issues we are loud and the people around hear us and mostly never bother us. Each one is in his own world.**

...”By the way, **the Issue of homosexuality is mentioned in some Egyptian movies** now and does show it in different way, e.g., two young guys with no goals in life meet a respectful depressed old man who is living alone and waits for a friend who never didn’t comes. Then the meter man comes and he tries to seduce him with some love words in a movie called ‘A Meterman’s Tale’ (dheel elsamakah in arabic).

“There is an upcoming Egyptian movie which is very controversial and contains a main role of a man who works in the police and is gay too. It is not out yet but is the most expensive Egyptian film in budget, more than \$3 million budget. It is called ‘Yacoubian Building’.

“Another thing to mention, my older sister, 19, knows about my gay life and about my boyfriend. She tolerates that but still does not accept him totally. The rest of my family are still negative and feel insulted. I still live with my mother and sister. But, I think even if I stayed here next year, I will live alone or with my boyfriend if things are going fine. My brother will be coming and he will be the man of the house and I will be released from this burden and gladly give up that “oriental tradition” (Ammon, R. 2006 ‘Gay Egypt 2004-06: Gay Life (sort of) in Modern Egypt’, GlobalGayz website, March <http://www.globalgayz.com/g-egypt.html> – Accessed 6 June 2007 – Attachment 6).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

#### **Region Specific Links**

*The Daily Star – Egypt* website <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/>

## Topic Specific Links

GlobalGayz website <http://www.globalgayz.com/>

## Search Engines

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

## Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

## List of Attachments

1. RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response EGY17595*, 11 October.
2. DIMIA Country Information and Protection Support Section 2005, *Issues Brief: Homosexuals and Transsexuals in Egypt*, September. (CISNET EGYPT EGY090905)
3. Azimi, N. 'Prisoners of Sex' 2006, *The New York Times*, 3 December <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/magazine/03arabs.html?pagewanted=4&th&emc=th> – Accessed 4 December 2006. (CISNET EGYPT CX166241)
4. RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response EGY 31241*, 30 January.
5. Stack, L. 2007 'For Gay Egyptians, Life Online is the Only Choice', *The Daily Star – Egypt*, 18 May. <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7281> – Accessed 5 June 2007.
6. Ammon, R. 2006 'Gay Egypt 2004-06: Gay Life (sort of) in Modern Egypt', GlobalGayz website, March <http://www.globalgayz.com/g-egypt.html> – Accessed 6 June 2007.