

from leaving the country as part of a judicial investigation into the foreign funding of their organizations. A law signed by President el-Sisi in 2014 would allow prosecutors to seek 25-year sentences for illegally receiving foreign funding. Parliament has also proposed a new law regulating civil society organizations which, if adopted, would effectively outlaw independent human rights work in the country.

Despite repeated requests by U.S. officials, including some Republicans and Democrats in Congress, President el-Sisi's government has refused to release those detained for political reasons for months or years without charge or on trumped up charges like Egyptian-American citizen Aya Hijazi.

The media has also been targeted, with authorities threatening and jailing journalists who reported on political opposition. Some foreign journalists have been barred from the country after writing articles critical of the government. As of December 2016, Egypt was the third-highest jailer of journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. This pattern of harassment and arrests is not new. It has been happening for years, and, contrary to the representations of Egyptian officials, it is getting worse.

According to Human Rights Watch, members of the security forces, particularly the Interior Ministry's National Security Agency, routinely torture detainees to elicit confessions. This torture usually occurs during periods of enforced disappearance that can last for weeks or months. The widespread use of torture has also been reported by the State Department. Despite hundreds of reported cases of torture and enforced disappearance, since 2013, only a handful of police officers have reportedly been punished for violating the law.

According to information I have received, prison conditions remain deplorable, and political detainees are beaten, often deprived of contact with relatives and lawyers, and denied access to medical care.

The government's use of U.S. aircraft and other military equipment in its counterterrorism campaign against a local ISIS affiliate in the northern Sinai has not only resulted in indiscriminate attacks against civilians and other gross violations of human rights, it has made the terrorism situation worse. Requests by myself, as well as State and Defense Department officials and by independent journalists and representatives of human rights groups, for access to conflicted areas, have been denied.

While President Trump and other U.S. officials unabashedly praise President el-Sisi, I wonder how they reconcile their portrayal of him with his crackdown against civil society and brutal repression of dissent. In fact, it can't be reconciled, and it damages our own credibility as a strong defender of human rights and democratic principles.

I want to reiterate what I said in this Chamber on September 27, 2016, when I spoke about Aya Hijazi, the young Egyptian American social worker currently detained in Egypt. Ms. Hijazi, along with her Egyptian husband and five employees of their organization Belady, has been accused of salacious crimes that the government has yet to corroborate with any credible evidence; yet she has been jailed since May 21, 2014. Just last month, a decision in her case was inexplicably delayed until later this month. It is long past time for her ordeal to end.

The United States and Egypt have common interests in an increasingly troubled region. Egypt has acted to reduce the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, and it has helped to broker ceasefires with Hamas. Our support for Egypt is demonstrated by the fact that, over the past 70 years, U.S. taxpayers have provided more than \$70 billion in economic and military aid to Egypt. I doubt that many Egyptians know that, as most have a decidedly unfavorable opinion of the United States.

After three decades of corrupt autocratic rule by former President Mubarak, Egypt once again has a former military officer as President who has chosen to rule by force. It is neither justified, nor is it necessary. If, on the contrary, President el-Sisi were to demonstrate that he has a credible plan for transforming Egypt's economy, for improving education and creating jobs, for respecting due process and other fundamental rights, and for addressing the discrimination and lack of economic opportunities that are at the root of the violence in the Sinai, the Egyptian people would support him. They would also have a brighter future. Instead, I fear that, by relying on repression, he is sowing the seeds of misery and civil unrest, which is in the interest of neither the Egyptian people nor the American people.

MONTENEGRO'S ACCESSION INTO NATO

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I am pleased the U.S. Senate voted favorably to add Montenegro as a permanent member to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, sending a strong signal of transatlantic unity. NATO plays a vital role in maintaining security and stability throughout Europe, and including Montenegro in this strategic alliance will strengthen NATO and encourage stability within the region.

Montenegro is a growing democracy that has repeatedly proven itself to be a valuable ally since joining NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in 2006. They are partnered with our Maine National Guard, and have been a strong ally in the fight in Afghanistan since 2010. Having visited Montenegro, I can say, without a doubt, that it has demonstrated a commitment to NATO, the United States, and regional stability.

This vote sends clear message of support to our friends in Montenegro. It also sends a strong message to NATO and gives notice that the United States will stand up for Western democracies, despite continued pressure from the Kremlin. We must deter Russia's destabilizing actions in the region, including Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its continued support for rebels in eastern Ukraine. Putin is learning lessons from these examples and will continue his quest to expand his influence as far as the world community will allow. This aggression by the Russian Federation undermines peace and stability not only in the Balkan region, but also in all of Europe, which constitutes a direct threat to U.S. security interests.

Montenegro's accession to NATO is in the best interest of the United States, NATO, and peace and stability in Europe. This vote by the U.S. Senate sends a clear message of our commitment to NATO, to the people of Montenegro, and to improving stability in the Balkan region. I look forward to Montenegro joining NATO as a full member.

ANNIVERSARY OF NATO

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, nearly 70 years ago today, the United States and 11 other nations—in the face of Soviet aggression—joined together in mutual defense to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. Since its inception, NATO has expanded to 28 member nations. The breadth of its mission is impressive—from ensuring regional stability and combating terrorism to training partner countries and supporting humanitarian aid. While NATO was founded to ensure Western peace and stability in the face of the Cold War, its work has come to encompass all corners and peoples of the globe.

NATO is more important than ever today in deterring regional conflict. The U.S. must stand by its ironclad commitment to NATO's security and solidarity as Russian President Vladimir Putin flouts international law and exerts Russian aggression around the world, from meddling in our own election to the illegal annexation of Crimea.

Our NATO allies need our support. I applaud Operation Atlantic Resolve, which coordinates the deployment of additional NATO troops to our allies in Eastern Europe. I also commend other U.S. efforts that support our NATO allies, like the European Reassurance Initiative. These play an essential role in bolstering our force readiness in the region to deter Russian aggression and demonstrate our commitment to the common cause and democratic principles that NATO embodies.

American support for NATO is and must remain steadfast. The nearly unanimous vote in the Senate ratifying Montenegro's accession to be a member state is evidence of this well-established, deeply founded support.