Dear High Representative/Vice President,

In the coming weeks you will be preparing and then co-chairing the EU-Egypt Association Council, which is to adopt the priorities for the bilateral partnership, framing the upcoming 3 years. My group recognises the strategic importance of EU's partnership with Egypt, which covers a wide range of critical areas, from trade and energy, to migration management and regional security. We also acknowledge the socio-economic challenges, and the terrorist threat the country is facing.

Nevertheless, we would like to urge you to make the protection of rule of law and human rights, including support for the civil society, the core priority of our partnership with Egypt.

The group I preside is extremely concerned about the crackdown on civil society and human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers in Egypt, including through laws dramatically limiting freedoms of expression and assembly. Different court rulings freezing assets of and imposing travel bans on the most prominent actors mean the effective closure of their activities. It is telling that none of the Egyptian invitees could participate in the December 2016 EU-NGO Forum in Brussels due to restrictions imposed on them by their government.

We watch closely the ongoing work on a new law regulating the civil society, and appreciate the engagement of the EU Delegation in Cairo. In our view, civil society should be actively included in an open, genuine and free dialogue when preparing laws that directly affect them.

Another source of grave concern are the many credible reports showing that numerous people have been detained in inhuman conditions, facing extreme forms of torture, and that enforced disappearances have become instrument of state policy, as tragically demonstrated by the case Giulio Regeni. The closure of the headquarters of the El Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation for Victims of Violence and Torture, beneficiary of long term EIDHR funding, only aggravates this situation.

Last but not least, the system of mass trials handing down thousands of death sentences and keeping people in years-long pre-trial detention must be abolished and the judiciary reformed. Again, the case of the Irish juvenile Ibrahim Halawa - who has spent over 3 years in appalling prison conditions waiting for a mass trial after participating in protests in Cairo - tragically demonstrates the deplorable character of the system.

On behalf of my political group I would like to urge you to clearly address all these issues at the Association Council, remind Egyptian authorities on their national and international legal obligations and push for reforms. Only a frank and direct dialogue with our counterparts, putting the rights of our citizens in the center of the debate, will sustainably reinforce our partnership.

Yours sincerely
Guy Verhofstadt
President of the Alliance for Liberals and Democrats in the European Parliament