# British-Egyptian grandmother’s hunger strike exposes UK’s faltering response to Alaa Abd el-Fattah’s detention



A British-Egyptian grandmother, Laila Soueif, is currently in a critical condition at St Thomas’s Hospital after nearly 250 days on hunger strike in protest against the imprisonment of her son, Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Family members describe her survival as a “miracle,” with medical professionals warning that her dangerously low blood sugar levels put her at severe risk of sudden death. At 69, Soueif has demonstrated remarkable resilience, having persisted in her strike against the Egyptian regime since 29 September of the previous year, coinciding with the end of Abd el-Fattah’s five-year prison sentence.

A former pro-democracy activist and mathematics professor, Abd el-Fattah has long been a target of the Egyptian authorities for his outspoken criticism of the regime. Since his initial detention in 2019, he has spent years behind bars, with the latest charges relating to a social media post about the murder of another activist. Despite completing his intended sentence, he remains imprisoned, highlighting ongoing concerns about Egypt's use of legal mechanisms to stifle dissent. Soueif’s hunger strike serves a dual purpose: to demand her son’s release and to press the British government, led by Sir Keir Starmer, to take a more decisive stance against the Egyptian authorities.

Medical interventions have become critical as Soueif’s health deteriorates; she was only able to briefly halt her strike earlier this year to accept a glucose drip, which has been described as a temporary measure. Her daughter, Sanaa Seif, expressed disbelief that her mother is still fighting, remarking that whatever fat reserves remain might be all that is keeping her organs functional. Ms Seif has publicly urged the British government to act swiftly while her mother still has the strength to protest, reflecting a sense of urgency that echoes throughout the family's plight.

The circumstances surrounding Abd el-Fattah's incarceration have drawn international condemnation, including from the United Nations, which has ruled his detention illegal on multiple counts. Calls for the British government to act have intensified, particularly after Sir Keir Starmer met Soueif in February, during which he promised to do “all that I can” to secure her son’s release. However, a lack of substantive action in subsequent months has frustrated both the family and their supporters, including MP John McDonnell, who have urged for greater urgency and the implementation of economic measures against Cairo to compel a response.

While the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) maintains that it is committed to securing Abd el-Fattah’s release, members of his family and supporters remain sceptical about the government’s effectiveness. They argue that without a more aggressive diplomatic approach, including potential economic repercussions for Egypt, meaningful change may not occur. The government's responses have thus far been characterised by routine statements rather than concrete actions, leaving many to wonder whether more drastic measures are necessary to influence the Egyptian regime.

As Laila Soueif continues her fight for justice, her health hangs in the balance, embodying the sacrifices made by families of dissidents who are subjected to oppressive regimes. The situation remains precarious, with increasing pressure on both the UK government and Egyptian authorities to take the necessary steps to secure Alaa Abd el-Fattah’s release and ensure the wellbeing of his mother, who has shown extraordinary bravery and determination in the face of despair.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/laila-soueif-keir-starmer-hunger-strike-b2762848.html), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-deeply-concerned-about-jailed-egyptian-british-dissidents-hunger-striking-mother-2025-06-03/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/laila-soueif-keir-starmer-hunger-strike-b2762848.html), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/a38b9591d0fe2e00a7713f8da2f626a1), [[5]](https://www.newarab.com/news/mother-alaa-abdel-fattah-eases-hunger-strike-amid-hope)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/28/mother-of-egypt-detainee-agrees-to-glucose-drip-after-150-day-hunger-strike), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pm-vows-to-help-hunger-strike-mother-to-secure-release-of-british-egyptian-son-BVKKP26NENOWNFVSEUTKO7EEGI/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-deeply-concerned-about-jailed-egyptian-british-dissidents-hunger-striking-mother-2025-06-03/), [[5]](https://www.newarab.com/news/mother-alaa-abdel-fattah-eases-hunger-strike-amid-hope), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pm-vows-to-help-hunger-strike-mother-to-secure-release-of-british-egyptian-son-BVKKP26NENOWNFVSEUTKO7EEGI/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/laila-soueif-keir-starmer-hunger-strike-b2762848.html), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/a38b9591d0fe2e00a7713f8da2f626a1), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/28/mother-of-egypt-detainee-agrees-to-glucose-drip-after-150-day-hunger-strike)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/laila-soueif-keir-starmer-hunger-strike-b2762848.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-deeply-concerned-about-jailed-egyptian-british-dissidents-hunger-striking-mother-2025-06-03/> - The British government has expressed deep concern over the health of Laila Soueif, the 69-year-old mother of imprisoned Egyptian-British activist Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Soueif, a mathematics professor and long-time activist, was hospitalized in London after continuing a hunger strike aimed at securing her son’s release. Alaa Abd el-Fattah, a prominent figure from Egypt’s 2011 Arab Spring uprising, was sentenced in 2021 to five years in prison for allegedly spreading fake news via social media—a charge frequently used against government critics. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s spokesman confirmed ongoing contact with Soueif’s family and reiterated the government’s commitment to securing Abd el-Fattah’s release. British Foreign Secretary David Lammy has also raised the issue directly with his Egyptian counterpart. The Egyptian embassy in London has not responded to requests for comment. The UK continues to engage Egyptian authorities at the highest levels to advocate for Abd el-Fattah's freedom.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/a38b9591d0fe2e00a7713f8da2f626a1> - Laila Soueif, the mother of jailed British-Egyptian pro-democracy activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah, was hospitalized in London with dangerously low blood sugar after resuming a full hunger strike on May 20, 2025. Soueif, who has been on hunger strike since late September 2024 to protest her son's continued imprisonment in Egypt, had previously paused her strike in March following a promise from UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer to pressure Egypt for Abdel-Fattah’s release. However, after seeing no progress, she resumed her protest, having now lost 42% of her body weight over 242 days. Abdel-Fattah, imprisoned since 2019 for allegedly spreading false news, was sentenced to five years in 2021 and remains incarcerated despite completing the sentence if his pre-trial detention were counted. He has also been on hunger strike for 90 days. Human rights groups assert thousands of critics of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi have been unjustly imprisoned. The UK government stated it is actively engaging Egyptian officials at the highest levels to secure Abdel-Fattah’s release and is monitoring Laila Soueif's condition.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/28/mother-of-egypt-detainee-agrees-to-glucose-drip-after-150-day-hunger-strike> - After more than 150 days without food, Laila Soueif agreed to be put on a glucose drip, although it is only likely to delay her full collapse by days. She said she had taken the step as part of a deal she had reached with her children that they would be allowed one chance to intervene before she collapses. She has been on hunger strike to free her British-Egyptian son, Alaa Abd el-Fattah, from a Cairo jail. Fattah, a writer and activist, has been arrested numerous times and last September he completed his five-year sentence – if his two years in detention before sentencing are taken into account, as is specified by Egyptian law. Soueif was admitted to St Thomas’ hospital in central London on Monday due to dangerously low blood sugar levels. A note released by her doctor said there was a high risk of sudden death. She insists: “I am willing to die and no, I am not personally scared. I am worried about my girls. It is like I feel apologetic to them. But I think by now I am just as effective dead as alive. I think the campaign for his release will go on if I die. It is strong enough that it will continue after I have gone, and so I will have not died in vain.”
5. <https://www.newarab.com/news/mother-alaa-abdel-fattah-eases-hunger-strike-amid-hope> - Laila Soueif, the mother of jailed Egyptian-British activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah, is easing her hunger strike after nearly 160 days due to "developments" that have given her "hope", a campaign group said Wednesday. Laila Soueif, 68, has been in a London hospital for over a week, where her doctors had deemed her condition life-threatening. Soueif launched her hunger strike to protest Egypt's detention of her son, Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent activist who has been held for over five years. As she nears 160 days of being on hunger strike, Soueif said she would switch to a partial hunger strike of 300 calories "consumed as liquids and not solid food", the Free Alaa campaign group announced on X. "There have been developments that have given me hope," Soueif said according to the group, after Prime Minister Keir Starmer phoned Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi last week to press her son's case.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pm-vows-to-help-hunger-strike-mother-to-secure-release-of-british-egyptian-son-BVKKP26NENOWNFVSEUTKO7EEGI/> - The Prime Minister has met with a mother who has been on hunger strike for 140 days telling her he will do “all that I can” to secure the release of her jailed British-Egyptian son. Laila Soueif has previously criticised Sir Keir Starmer for not responding to her, and says time is running out as her health worsens. On Sunday, Sir Keir vowed to press the Egyptian government for the release of pro-democracy activist Alaa Abd El Fattah, 43. Having met Laila Soueif this week, my message is clear. I will do all that I can to secure the release of her son Alaa Abd el-Fattah and reunite him with his family. We will continue to raise his case at the highest levels of the Egyptian government and press for his release. — Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer) February 16, 2025 Ms Soueif, 68, has been subsisting solely on black coffee, restorative salts and herbal tea during her hunger strike and has lost more than 20 kilograms in weight.
7. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2025-01-24/mother-on-hunger-strike-for-more-than-one-hundred-days-fights-for-sons-freedom> - A mother has been on hunger strike for more than one hundred days following her son's imprisonment in Egypt. Laila Soueif, 68, from Streatham, is pressing for her son's release. Her son, Alaa Abd El Fattah's, a British-Egyptian activist and writer. He was meant to be released in September 2024 after a five year sentence for 'spreading fake news', and is a vocal critic of the Egyptian president. To raise awareness of his imprisonment, Laila is not eating anything at all and surviving only on rehydration salts, water and herbal drinks that don't have any calories. Six months after his planned liberation, he's still behind bars and Laila worries that 'time is running out'. She makes daily visits to the foreign office as she awaits news and continues to ask Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, for help. Outside Downing Street she speaks to passersby and has posters of Alaa's face, with words including 'Kier Starmer bring my son home' and '#FreeAlaa'. "I'm sure they are listening, but they're not responding," she said.