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**Testimony Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

***“Egypt: Human Rights Seven Years After the Revolution”***

December 6, 2017

I would like to thank Co-Chairs, Representatives Hultgren and McGovern, for hosting this important hearing on the state of human rights in Egypt. I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you our assessment of the current situation of the Copts in Egypt.

In January 2011, Egyptians took to the streets in a popular uprising that brought down Mubarak’s corrupt despotic regime that had lasted for almost three decades. Copts who were significantly represented in the uprising, had high hopes as the rest of Egyptians for an open secular civil society where all Egyptian citizens are equal before the law, free to pursue their personal aspirations and beliefs with a free conscience; a new Egypt.

Seven tumultuous years later, such hopes proved more elusive than ever before, if not replaced with despair. Currently, the Copts’ situation under the rule of president el-Sisi [is worse than it was under Mubarak](#).<sup>1</sup>

From the outset, the brutal response of Egypt’s Army on Oct. 9, 2011 injuring 321 and killing 28 peaceful Coptic demonstrators, several of them trampled under the Army’s armored vehicles in what is now known as “Maspero massacre,” was intended to convey one message; Copts are not supposed to have a political voice in Egypt’s future. In that massacre, the Egyptian Army set a model for later terrorist attacks in Europe that use trucks to kill peaceful civilians.

The short-lived one-year rule of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt witnessed a rise in attacks on the Copts, their person, property and churches by fanatic Islamists. More significantly, for the first time in modern history we witnessed mob rioters scaling the walls of Cairo’s St. Mark’s Cathedral, where the Coptic Patriarch resides, under the eyes of Central Security Forces standing there passively.

The second popular uprising that brought an end to the Muslim brotherhood’s rule and the intervention of the Army under el-Sisi revived the country’s and the Copt’s hopes. Despite the overwhelming popular uprising during which, it is estimated 20 million Egyptian’s took to the streets, Copts were once again used as a scapegoat, were singled out for supporting el-Sisi, and were the target of the Muslim Brother’s rage. Over one hundred and ten churches and Coptic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2017/09/18/copts-in-egypt-situation-and-policy-recommendations/>

institutions were burned down or destroyed in August 2013 after the break-up of the Rabaa sit-in which was described by the Right Honorable Lord Alton of Liverpool, UK as the “Egypt’s Kristallnacht”.

Since his election as a president, Mr. el-Sisi has pursued increasingly authoritarian measures to consolidate his power, silencing all political dissent, controlling the media, imprisoning human rights activists, and failing to protect religious minorities, much less end the systematic and systemic discrimination to make them equal citizens. Furthermore, Copts have been subjected to more attacks during el-Sisi’s rule than before, [as indicated by Mr. Bahey el-Din Hassan](#)<sup>2</sup> of Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies.

At this point, I would like to emphasize that Coptic Solidarity which I represent, is **not** a political opposition to President el-Sisi, but rather a civil society actor that advocates for a system in Egypt where Copts and other minorities attain their equal rights along with all other citizens. I would also like to add that we fully support Egypt’s efforts to combat Islamic terrorism, but equally warn that most of the violence against Copts is home-grown and a direct result of bankrupt policies that have effectively helped to produce the very kind of Islamic extremism that Mr. el-Sisi says he is fighting. In fact, as eloquently put by Dr. Fouad Abdel Moneim Riad, member of Egypt’s National Human Rights Council and a former judge at the International Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, “The real danger to Egypt’s very existence is not terrorism, but criminal [fanaticism against an authentic part of the Egyptian nation, and the state’s lack of seriousness to prevent it.](#)”<sup>3</sup>

Since Sadat initiated the Islamization process of Egypt in the nineteen seventies, Copts have been subjected to this modern wave of persecution. Copts are indigenous Christian Egyptians. They represent 10-12% of Egypt’s population, numbering over 10 million. However, they have no political party or body to represent them and defend their interests and aspirations. This by default has left the church as the only institution left to represent them vis a vis the government, a situation that is certainly advantageous to the government which has historically succeeded in co-opting if not coercing the Church leadership to tow its line. The current church leadership’s denial that Copts are being persecuted or attacked despite all objective measures is a blatant example. Both the Coptic Patriarch, Pope Tawadros II, and Rev. Andrea Zaki, President of the Council of Protestant Churches, delivered letters to members of US Congress that visited Egypt in February 2017, stating fallaciously that Mr. el-Sisi’s “policies supporting the Christian community are unlike any Egyptian leader in history.” They declared that the situation of Christians in Egypt has improved, despite evidence to the contrary, as I will try to demonstrate shortly. The church leaders are already under severe pressure by the government-controlled media<sup>4</sup> in preparation for **Vice President Mike Pence’s imminent visit to Egypt**, to act “patriotically” and deny that Christians in Egypt are persecuted.

## A WAR OF ATTRITION

It is a fact that Copts are under attack in numerous ways—from the institutional and daily

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2017/08/14/the-copts-and-egypt-a-historically-critical-juncture/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2017/10/15/fanaticism-not-terrorism-is-the-real-danger-to-egypt/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.masrawy.com/news/news-videos/details/2017/10/30/1182172/عمرو-أديب-يحذر-من-زيارة-نائب-الرئيس-الأمريكي-لمصر>

systematic discrimination to the intermittent terrorization such as church bombings that cause large casualties. While the spectacular nature of the latter receives media attention, it is the mundane daily discrimination, oppression and harassment, which has the most pernicious effect, and which receives virtually no media attention or condemnation. This entrenched system of discrimination is no less heinous in breaking Copts down into a state of submission, hopelessness, and drives the dramatic rise of Coptic emigration from their homeland.

The increasingly suffocating domination of Islamists on Egypt's life, with active help of State institutions, has virtually closed the social public space to all things non-Islamic. The state applies systemic and systematic discrimination against Copts—one that is rooted in the old Islamic *Sharia* precepts of *dhimmitude*, whereby non-Muslim minorities should submit to a host of debilitating and even humiliating conditions in exchange for a bare measure of tolerance, but never equality.

**Now let's look at some key aspects of what Copts are facing today:**

## **1- EQUALITY**

Copts are seriously underrepresented in all government and public institutions. The number of Copts accepted to military and police academies, judiciary posts, diplomatic corps, and university academic posts are limited to a one to two percent invisible ceiling. There are strictly no Copts in "sensitive" sectors, such as State Security<sup>5</sup> and other intelligence organs, leading army command posts or the presidency. The entire local governance system is practically free of Copts; not a single governor or even deputy governor is a Copt. No Copt occupies a public university president or faculty dean post. Copts are relegated to one or two symbolic Cabinet positions—currently only one junior position (minister with no portfolio of 'Egyptian Immigrants').

**Coptic Solidarity urges that Egypt expeditiously:**

- a) Enact Constitutional Articles that establish the equality of all Egyptian citizens before the law and prohibit discrimination on basis of ethnicity, gender, or religion.***
- b) Integrate Copts in all of Egypt's state institutions; Ensure that at least 10% of all legislative, executive, judicial, military, educational, diplomatic corps, and police positions be filled by Copts, commensurate with their percentage of the general population, by applying "Affirmative Action" measures.***
- c) Remove the category of religious affiliation from Identity cards and all official documents.***
- d) Establish an independent, permanent commission to monitor and combat discrimination, as stipulated in the 2014 Amended Constitution.***

## **2- FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE, RELIGION, OR BELIEF:**

The passage of the new Church Construction Law in Sep. 2016, which was touted as a positive achievement by el-Sisi's government, proved to be seriously flawed. As Mr. Bahey el-Din Hassan of CIHRS put it in his [speech at Coptic Solidarity's recent conference](#),<sup>6</sup> "it was under President Sisi's

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<sup>5</sup> Currently referred to as "National Security"

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2017/08/14/the-copts-and-egypt-a-historically-critical-juncture/>

**tenure that the Copts, for the first time in Egypt's modern history, became officially and legally recognized as a 'sect' and not equal citizens through the passing of the Church building law and the dropping of Egyptians' long standing collective demand for 'A Unified Law for Houses of Worship.'"**

The passage of this law that [does not place churches on equal footing with mosques](#)<sup>7</sup>, [maintains the old obstacles](#)<sup>8</sup> that have always prevented the construction of churches. Scores of churches remain closed by the State Security for no other reason but to pander to fundamentalist Islamists.

The vast majority of Egypt's villages have no churches, and lack building permits. Copts get arrested for "praying without permit" if they dare assemble in a private house. Four Coptic Orthodox churches have been recently closed by State Security Forces in Minya, Upper Egypt, "for lack of permit." Ironically, Egypt's minister of Endowment (Islamic Affairs) boasted<sup>9</sup> on Nov. 10, "almost 200 newly built mosques have been inaugurated in the previous 40 days alone."

Another aspect of religious discrimination is obligatory declaration of one's religious affiliation in all formalities including the national identity card, commercial contracts, notary registers, or even club membership applications. Such measures, prohibited by international conventions, naturally facilitate discriminatory practices.

**Coptic Solidarity recommends:**

***a) Given that the new church construction law is fraught with ambiguities and red tape, and the continued dearth of churches all over the country, there should be a clear benchmark, such as the approval of construction of certain number of churches annually, if the total number of approved applications for church permits falls short.***

### **3- HATE CULTURE**

The government in Egypt is actively imposing Sunni Islam on the public sphere to a suffocating level to gain public support. This only leads to alienate and denigrate those who do not belong to the Sunni Muslim majority and make them natural targets for hate.

Sermons in mosques across the country or broadcast through TV and Radio are awash with hate speech against non-Muslims. Religious figures, starting from the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, proclaim Christians and Jews as "infidels" (*Kuffar*) knowing fully that according to Islamic Sharia, such designation is not a mere theological categorization, but it means a free license to kill, or at least persecute, the infidels.

The recent heinous attack on a mosque in Sinai **targeting Sufi Muslims, who practice a mystical form** of Islam, considered heretical by Sunni Salafis, is only a reminder that such hate culture knows

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2016/07/22/egypt-must-pass-church-building-law-that-breaks-conditions-of-servitude/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2016/09/06/reproducing-the-status-quo-new-church-construction-law-consolidates-discriminatory-state-policies-and-confiscates-citizenship-rights-of-future-generations/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.elbalad.news/3024783>

no limit.

Mandatory school curricula, established by the Ministry of Education are permeated with concepts and ideas that instill and promote prejudice against non-Muslims. Religion courses aside, this is particularly the case with Arabic language courses where Islamic texts permeate such courses, including Koranic texts, some of which openly disparage core Christian beliefs. Non-Muslims students are required to recite and uphold them. Lessons promote the idea that leadership positions should be held by Muslims only, and that they should take a firm position against those who “do not submit to the orders of Allah and His Prophet.” History courses ignore the Coptic era, which spans six centuries. Contributions of the Copts to Egypt’s history are trivialized in a few simplistic paragraphs. In social studies, precepts of liberty, equality, citizenship, individuality, personal freedom, freedom of conscience or belief, the constitution, democracy and justice get scant mention.

**Coptic Solidarity recommends the Egyptian government:**

- a) Enact laws to criminalize Islamist hate speech directed towards non-Muslims.***
- b) Purge schools and education curricula of topics and texts that instill hatred of people of other faiths, entice violence and foster a sense of “Islamic supremacy.”***
- c) Foster voices of civil society and secularism in media outlets.***

#### **4- “BLASPHEMY” LAWS**

There is an unprecedented rise in the application of “derision of religion” articles in the penal code, colloquially known as “blasphemy” laws. The stated purpose for these laws was to protect all three “monotheistic” religions from attacks. In reality, they have been used to shield anything Islamic from criticism and unfairly target and convict Copts and Muslim reformers. In the meantime, anti-Christian statements in the media and religious edicts (*fatwas*) that denounce Christians as infidels (*kuffar*) go unpunished.

**Coptic Solidarity recommends Egypt:**

- a) Rescind “Derision of religions” articles in the penal code.***
- b) Pardon those convicted under these laws, and civil society activists tried under the harsh “demonstration” law.***

#### **5- CULTURE OF IMPUNITY**

Contrary to the Egyptian government’s habit of attributing the attacks to “foreign” terrorists, most are perpetrated by homegrown Islamists and the fanatic populace. In most instances, no one is held accountable for these atrocities, fostering a culture of impunity. Security Forces typically arrive well after the attacks have run their course, investigations are superficial, Copts are pressured to accept “reconciliation meetings,” forgoing their right to pursue their attackers in court, and suspected attackers are released within a short time. In this culture of impunity, the Egyptian government has failed in its duty to protect Coptic citizens. The government’s denial of discrimination and attacks on Copts is in itself a form of impunity.

There is strong reason to believe that State Security, which for decades owned the “Coptic dossier,” is often not only complicit in tolerating violence against Copts, but may be an actor in stimulating such violence.<sup>10</sup>

**Coptic Solidarity recommends that Egypt:**

- a) Remove the Coptic “dossier” from the hands of State Security.*
- b) End the collusion of the police and local authorities in violence targeting Copts, to end the impunity that attackers enjoy and that entices them to continue attacking.*
- b) Criminalize forced collective expulsion of Coptic families from their villages where their ancestors have lived for centuries.*
- c) Abolish the arbitrary “Reconciliation Sessions” together with the so-called “House of the Family” institution, which acts as an umbrella to legitimize these sessions.*

## **CONCLUSION**

Copts are facing a multifaceted war of attrition that leaves them with few choices, namely; **convert to Islam; live as barely tolerated dhimmis and endure humiliation and recurring bouts of persecution; or leave the country. Thus, not only has the Egyptian state failed to protect its Coptic citizens, but also it has continued to treat them as second-class citizens through a policy of systemic discrimination.**

Mr. el -Sisi wins accolades among some American politicians by demonizing the Muslim Brotherhood with whom his struggle is entirely political not ideological, while giving the even more radical Salafis free reign in Egypt. Their partnership is such that, the visibly pious Salafis confer Islamic legitimacy on his rule, and in exchange he allows their ideology, which is equally, if not more hateful towards Christians, Jews and secularists than the Brotherhood’s, to infiltrate every level of the Egyptian society, including the media, public education and, of course, mosques.

President el-Sisi’s modus operandi consists of portraying what is otherwise homegrown terrorist attacks on Copts as perpetrated either by foreign terrorists or the Muslim Brotherhood, thereby exonerating his government. The US is now engaging Egypt in the fight against Islamist terrorism and stands to exercise its weight and moral values to promote equality, civil society, and religious freedom for all in Egypt. Egypt’s stability is vital, but Copts should not be the victims – or collateral damage - that pays the ultimate price in the war on terrorism.

The war on terrorism needs to be fought less in military battles and more within Egypt (and Saudi Arabia), against institutions such as al-Azhar, which has continued to promote the totalitarian hate ideology of Salafi and Wahabi Islamists and produce intolerance and terrorism. **President Sisi’s call for reform of Islamic religious discourse has been just that, a call. It’s merely a shiny veneer to polish his image abroad, and was never translated into action.** Now is the time.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and ask that my full testimony be submitted for the Congressional record. I look forward to answering any questions you have.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2017/11/22/%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AF/>