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**(CSCE)**  
**US House of Representatives**  
**"Minority at Risk: Coptic Christians in Egypt"**  
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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members of Congress and Commissioners, thank you for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify and focus on the issues related to the Christian minority in Egypt, particularly as many of these issues appear to be ignored in current policy considerations.

There are a number of issues minorities have faced in Egypt over the years including violent attacks, lack of justice against those who perpetrate attacks, discrimination in the workplace and in society at large, inequality under the law, hate propaganda in the media, and long term issues related to peacefully practicing one's faith and worshipping freely.

Numerous media articles and reports document the discrimination and violence against Christians and other minorities under the Mubarak regime. There was great hope among minorities, especially as the Egyptian people stood side by side in Tahrir Square calling for Mubarak to leave, that a post-Mubarak Egypt would provide more freedom and peace for minorities. Tragically, that has not occurred. Instead, there is clear evidence of an increasing pattern and practice, by commission and omission, of government-sanctioned persecution of Coptic Christians.

### **Violent Attacks**

Under this new government, the lack of protection and security for many Egyptians, and particularly for minorities, is clear. Since the fall of Mubarak, violent physical attacks against Christians have been implemented by the military, extremists, government officials, and verbally via government-paid religious leaders.

- **Military:** the military has attacked monasteries and protestors and has failed to intervene to protect victims under attack.
- **Extremists:** the extremists have attacked individuals, at least four churches, and many Christians' homes and places of business. Afterwards, the attackers frequently celebrated by chanting "Allah Akbar." (Please see links:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edVRFUOSIAw>,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiol9cPm-4g>,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKC9pCitXHc&feature=related>,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bnmkQ67qYY> ) Reports suggest that in one incident the attackers even handed out chocolates in the street to celebrate the violence.

- Government officials: The Governor of El Minya demolished 10 homes because the owners refused to donate a portion of their land to the building of a mosque. In addition, he also attempted to demolish a church building but was interrupted by Coptic protestors. Both events occurred on February 28, 2011.
- Government-sponsored mosques: In Egypt, the government is responsible for the salaries of Imams and other religious leaders in the mosques. Some of these same state employees have been openly and very publicly involved in inciting their followers to violence against minorities, particularly Christians. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, in November of 2010 raised concerns that "incitement to violence in Egyptian media and government-funded mosques is contributing to increasing sectarian tensions." More recent eyewitness accounts from those leaving Egypt suggest that this incitement continues to be a serious problem.

With your permission, I would like to submit for the Record a list of attacks since the uprising in February of this year. This list reflects attacks that occurred after the horrific Alexandria church bombing in January.

### **Women and Girls**

In addition to the violence aimed at communities, homes and places of worship, as my colleague Michele Clark has testified, there have been a number of cases of the kidnapping, rape, forced conversion and/or forced marriage of Coptic women and girls. The victims include minor children, as well as married and single women. Further, there have been open threats to harm any women walking in public who are not veiled. This threat was disseminated by Salafis, who could be seen as the "Taliban" of Egypt (they have even received money from Saudi Arabia). Throughout the month of March, Salafis told Egyptians that on March 29, 2011, anyone not wearing a veil would be attacked. According to the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, for the first time in Minufiya governorate,

"350 Salafists confronted the state law and surrounded a house of a woman ... forced her out of her house, threw her house's furniture onto the street, burned the house and threatened to kill her if she returned to her home. They did so claiming that her conduct was

immoral and dishonorable ... The Egyptian Center for Human Rights received a number of complaints from several women on receiving threats on Facebook that they will be 'punished' if they do not wear the legitimate clothes. The threats mentioned a time limit of Tuesday, March 29, 2011. This matter raised panic among a large number of women in Egypt. They are asking whether it will be safe to go to schools, universities and work or whether they will be attacked."  
(Press release from March 28, 2011)

These threats against women were focused on both Muslims and Christians, despite the fact that Christians are not Muslims and therefore should not be subject to the enforcement of wearing a veil in public. Mr. Chairman, the veil issue is deeply disturbing as it brings to mind the actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan and their attacks against non-veiled women or against men who did not dress according to Taliban dictates. It is quite disturbing to think of Egypt being controlled by Taliban-style extremists, as the rich culture and history of Egypt would not be possible with people like that in control of Egyptian society.

### **Injustice and Impunity**

Many are concerned by the continued pattern of impunity afforded to violent extremists and attackers, as well as by those in the state security services (SSI) involved in torture. More recently, and more publicly, security officials and the military stood by watching as churches were burned and destroyed and individuals and peaceful protestors were attacked. There is no record to date of any security official, SSI, military or a member of any other security apparatus, being held responsible for standing by and watching the destruction and violence. All this, despite the fact that videos of soldiers and others standing by are on YouTube and the Government could easily find out who was involved in allowing the attacks to begin, or last for much longer than necessary. Also, it is important to note that the "Coptic" issue is handled primarily through the state security offices - it is seen as a *security* issue, not as a political or human rights issue.

An additional and related issue of concern is the intolerance against the Copts reflected when authorities, after a violent attack, arrest Muslims *and* Christians for the attacks. It has never been clear why Christians are arrested in these attacks. While there has been violence perpetrated by Christian during attacks, it has almost never been reported that the violence is anything but in self-defense. It does not take much contemplation to realize that in a country like Egypt, where minorities frequently live in fear, a minority would *not* instigate violence or riots or property destruction against itself, let alone against a majority where violent extremists commit crimes. It is quite absurd to think otherwise. Yet, the Egyptian Government, most recently in the May 2011 Imbaba church attacks, arrested some Muslims and a number of Christians and blamed them all *equally* for the attacks. In another case where a mob of thousands attacked those involved in the opening of the St. Mary

and St. Abraham Church one media report from May 27 reveals that a "Military court in Egypt has sentenced three Christian Copts to 5-years imprisonment on charges of possession of firearms and pocket knives. The Court released all other Muslims and Copts arrested following clashes on May 19." (*Assyrian International News Agency*)

Further, as was raised by Dina Guirgis in the January 2011 hearing held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, if on the rare occasions when there is an attempt to hold perpetrators to account, the government often forces victims into "reconciliation sessions" where justice is completely undermined and criminals are not punished. Such practices have continued since the fall of the Mubarak regime.

The Government seems to be afraid of arresting, prosecuting and punishing the actual perpetrators and criminals in these attacks. Why? It is unclear, but with the exponential increase of the activities of extremists in Egyptian society, the Government may be afraid of the extremists. If this is true, Egypt is in deep trouble. The Egyptian people deserve a government that governs fairly and transparently and brings justice where it is due.

As a side note, it is important to raise the point that when the Egyptian Government discusses, or the Western media reports on, clashes in Egypt, they frequently use the term "sectarian clashes." This terminology causes concern because it assumes that both sides in a clash have power. The practical reality on the ground is that even though the Copts are a large minority within Egypt, they do not instigate clashes, but some feel compelled to defend themselves when they are attacked.

### **Torture and Impunity**

One concern regarding impunity is that the SSI, the infamous state security service, which was intimately involved in torture under the Mubarak regime, has allegedly been disbanded and a new government agency has been formed. While the intent may be laudable, the reality is that many of the same security officials simply moved to this new organization to continue their work. Those involved in torture have not been brought to justice. In a number of firsthand accounts I have heard, the torturers gave their full names to the victims being tortured. As a result, it is not difficult to find out who the torturers are. There are torture victims throughout Egypt, from the minority as well as Egyptian society at large who, if they felt it was safe and there would be real justice, might come forward to name these criminals.

### **ID Cards**

Yet another issue that has not changed since the Mubarak regime lost power is the unequal application of the law. This issue comes into play in relation to the building or repair of churches and in relation to the refusal to issue new government identity

cards to those desiring to change their faith to any religion that is not Muslim. While there reportedly have been a few recent cases where a change was allowed on the ID card, changes are rare. In general, there is opposition by local police, government officials, state security officials, the courts, and by religious laws, all of which inspire people to harm and in some way retaliate against the person trying to change his or her faith identification. In one case, Maher El-Gohary and his daughter were forced into hiding and were later brutally attacked when in August 2008, he filed a lawsuit against the Egyptian Government in order to change the religion listed on his state ID card. Both he and his daughter publicly were branded apostates. The two fled the country. (*Compass Direct News Service, March 21, 2011*).

### **Constitution**

Mr. Chairman, in the very near future, a group of Egyptians will be drafting a new Constitution. There are disturbing signs that the freedoms of the Egyptian people may be more restricted and Christians and other minorities will be even less safe than they are currently.

The next step in the Constitutional process is that a permanent Constitution will be written. The Muslim Brotherhood and other extremists want to wait until after the parliamentary elections so that, as they plan to control the next parliament, they can elect the constitutional committee from the newly elected parliamentarians. The secular and moderate Muslims, the Christians, and other minorities all would like to see the elite, trained professionals of the country write the Constitution *prior* to the elections so the process is not hijacked by extremists.

It is important that the U.S. and the international community press Egypt to live up to its human rights commitments and ensure that those commitments are enshrined in the new Constitution, not as an afterthought, but up front. It is only when there is a Constitution that protects the people and their fundamental rights and freedoms that there will be any recourse for minorities or any citizen who is discriminated against or persecuted to bring criminals to justice. I would like to draw your attention to an article by Ms. Ana Palacio, Former Foreign Affairs Minister of Spain, who refers to the Constitution and external pressure being successful,

“Senior Editor of the Cairo weekly *Watani* Adel Guindy suggested that, without interfering in the process, the EU can push for ‘an unambiguous reference to full and unconditional respect of the universal human rights values [in Egyptian constitution] as expressed in international conventions. While such a text will be no guarantee that the human rights are respected, its absence will be a guarantee (as is the case today) that human rights will NOT be respected.’”

*(Article cited is “Upheaval in the Arab World: a (Close) Call for the European Union,” Ana Palacio, Former Foreign Affairs Minister of Spain,*

*Former MEP, Former Senior Vice President and General Counsel of the World Bank Group, p. 2, Footnote 6)*

### **Financial Aid**

While this hearing is primarily focused on the fundamental rights of minorities in Egypt, I would like to raise the issue of economic aid to Egypt. While it may be difficult to implement, it would be a very helpful tool to link aid to Egypt, including forgiveness of debt, to the upholding and protection of human rights norms. Some might see this recommendation as controversial because the Egyptian economy is not doing well, and as a result all of Egyptian society, especially the poor are suffering. However, simply giving debt relief or other financial aid to Egypt with no stipulations will likely not bring much benefit to the Egyptian people as a whole. The same Egyptian people who banded together in Tahrir Square to call for Mubarak to leave and to rally for a new, democratic and free Egypt deserve to benefit from any aid.

### **Security Threats in the U.S.**

Some people have raised the idea that the violence in Egypt involves a security risk to the U.S. That might be puzzling, in light of the threats from Al-Qaeda and terrorists networks, but let me share how that threat has already come to the U.S. and could increase if extremists and Salafists are allowed free reign to impose their beliefs on Egyptian law and society. In the aftermath of the Alexandria church New Years bombing, a website run by a jihadi forum group issued a call to attack churches in Egypt, the Middle East AND churches in Europe, the U.S and other countries. Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record the printed version of an extremist website calling for attacks on churches in the U.S and listing the names of those churches as well as the phone numbers and other identifying information. The original is in Arabic and there is an English translation. I would draw your attention to the photos further down the page which help would-be attackers design and build bombs for these church attacks. I am from the New York/New Jersey area and prior to Orthodox Christmas, which is celebrated in January, our community had numerous meetings with regional security officials in order to ensure that our Christmas celebrations could be carried out safely. In fact, some in our community were afraid to attend those celebrations because of the threats – and these churches are not located in Egypt!

It is deeply, deeply disturbing that even before the Salafists and other extremists were released from Egyptian prisons or flooded back into Egypt from abroad, this type of direct security threat affected the U.S. If the extremists have their way, it is

likely that the threat against Egyptian-Americans and Americans in general could increase.

## **Recommendations**

**The following are recommendations for the Egyptian Government, the U.S. government, and the international community:**

### **Special Envoy**

- We support and strongly urge the passage of H.R. 440 and S. 1245 which provides for the appointment of a Special Envoy for minorities in the Middle East. We also strongly urge the Administration to appoint someone to that position who is highly qualified and has the stature needed to ensure the issues related to minorities are included in the highest level of the U.S. Government, particularly during this historic transition in Egypt, Iraq and other countries in the region.

### **Implementation of Justice**

- We strongly urge that the Egyptian Government bring to justice those state security officials, including the SSI, military and other branches, involved in the torture of Egyptian citizens.
- Further, we urge the U.S. Government to press the Egyptian Government to prosecute perpetrators of violence before, during and after the uprisings and the historic events in Egypt this year.
- We also urge the U.S. Government to ban visas and travel to the U.S. for any government official involved in torture. While this may be difficult to implement immediately, the U.S. could assist in setting up a mechanism that would allow for torture victims to report the names of their torturers. With the proper instruments and processes in place to allow for confirmation that a government official is indeed involved in torture, the U.S. could easily implement a visa ban against these officials similar to that in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.
- We strongly urge the Egyptian Government to stop arresting both Christians and Muslims when Christians and their property are attacked and instead bring the real perpetrators to justice.

### **Constitution**

- We urge the U.S. Government and the international community to press the Egyptian Government to ensure that its commitments to international human rights norms are upheld in the foundational sections of the Constitution and are not undermined by any subsequent articles or passages.
- We also urge the Egyptian Government to allow for international monitors for the upcoming elections. If the election is to be free and fair, there is no reason not to have election observers and monitors.

### **Economy**

- As mentioned above, while we welcome efforts to help Egypt in its current economic situation, we believe that unconditional financial aid would be a strategic error - aid should be linked to Egypt's human rights record in terms of constitutional stipulations, laws and practices over the short and medium terms. We urge the U.S Government, European governments and others in the international community providing financial aid to Egypt to tie that aid to Egypt's upholding and protecting fundamental human rights norms now and in any new Constitution.

Mr. Chairman, I again thank you for the opportunity to raise these concerns today. The people of Egypt, particularly the minorities, long for a society in which each is free to peacefully practice his or her faith and to live a life without fear. Muslims, Christians, and other minorities all deserve a stable, peaceful and free society. It is at this significant time in Egypt's history that real change is possible, but I fear that change will not happen unless there is an exponential increase in pressure both from inside and outside Egypt.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.