

GENOCIDE ALERT: THE ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT



CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY INTERNATIONAL

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Christian Solidarity International has issued a Genocide Alert for religious minorities, especially Coptic Orthodox Christians, living in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Conditions currently exist for a genocide of these groups by armed non-state actors, mostly Salafist extremists, acting in collaboration with or with the tacit consent of the Egyptian state.

Egyptian Copts, who constitute approximately 10% of Egypt's population, have been historically oppressed and marginalized to varying degrees by Egypt's Sunni Muslim majority. Since the overthrow of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, attacks on Copts from state and non-state actors have escalated significantly. Over 100 Copts have been killed in sectarian attacks since the overthrow of Mubarak – more than in the entire previous decade.¹ CSI has received reports of at least 14 attacks on Coptic churches in the same time period, including St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and 10 pogrom-style attacks on Christian communities.²

Attacks on Copts in post-revolution Egypt are carried out both by organized Salafist extremist groups, and by spontaneous mob gatherings of Muslim Egyptians. Often attacks on churches or Coptic neighborhoods follow disputes between Christians and Muslims over minor issues (such as a Christian tailor burning a Muslim man's shirt) or false allegations of Christians kidnapping or forcibly converting Muslim women.

Sometimes, however, Copts are victims of what Dr. Mariz Tadros calls "untriggered violence," in which Islamist groups mobilize followers to drive Christians out of their villages, even when no prior dispute is present. "What we are seeing is a growing trend of 'cleansing society' of Christians," Tadros says, a term that was unknown before the revolution, but which ordinary Egyptians are now using to describe the attacks.³ In July 2012, a spontaneous mob attack forced 100 Christian families in the village of Dashhour to flee, leaving the town bereft of Christians.⁴

Christian Solidarity International published a report in July 2012 documenting the disappearances, forced conversions and forced marriages of Egyptian Christian women to Muslim men. The report concluded that the disappearances were "organized and planned." The practice is widespread – four human rights attorneys cited in the report claimed to have knowledge of 550 such cases, with the frequency escalating since the Egyptian revolution.⁵ While the identity of those responsible for organizing the disappearances is usually unknown, in

one case in late 2012, the Egyptian Salafist Front openly claimed responsibility for and defended the disappearance and conversion of a 15-year-old girl from a Christian family.⁶

When the Egyptian state intervenes in instances of sectarian attack, it is typically to take the side of the anti-Copt attackers. Egypt's interim government, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, set the tone for the state's response to the increased sectarian violence in Maspero Square in Cairo on October 9, 2011, when the Egyptian army attacked a group of Christians and Muslim liberals peacefully protesting a recent church burning. 24 protestors were murdered, while state media broadcasts called on "honorable citizens" to come out into the streets to "defend the army against attack" from Coptic protestors.⁷ To date, the only individuals sentenced in connection with the violence in Maspero Square are two Christian men sentenced to three years in prison for "stealing weapons" from soldiers during the attack.⁸ In May 2012, an Egyptian State Security court handed down sentences for 12 Christians and 8 Muslims charged in connection with a sectarian clash in the town of Abu Qurqas in Minya province (in which a Muslim mob attacked a Christian neighborhood after a prominent Christian lawyer installed a speedbump outside his house). All 12 Christians received life sentences; all 8 Muslims were acquitted.⁹

Under the elected government of President Mohammad Morsi which succeeded the SCAF, the state has continued to ignore most anti-Copt attacks, and Egyptian police stood by while Muslim extremists attacked St. Mark's Cathedral during a funeral for four Christians murdered a few days earlier by Muslim attackers in al-Khosous.¹⁰ In cases of abduction or forced disappearance of young Coptic women, the families of victims must secure the services of an attorney simply to force police to register their case. Police rarely if ever assist in returning a victim to her family.¹¹

Even so, the continuing political conflict and chaos in Egypt has eroded the state's ability to exercise control. After massive anti-government protests erupted in the city of Port Said in early 2013, much of the Egyptian police force tasked with handling the disturbances went on strike, refusing to do battle with the protestors any longer. In the absence of a real police presence, lynchings of suspected criminals are an increasingly frequent occurrence. Al-Gama'at al-Islamiya, the Islamist terrorist group behind the savage anti-Coptic pogroms in al-Zawia al-Hamra in 1981, has taken on primary policing responsibility in Assiut City in Upper Egypt.¹²

Those Copts with the means to flee the violence are doing so – some 100,000 Egyptian Copts have relocated to the United States alone since the Egyptian revolution, and the number of Egyptians – mostly Copts – granted asylum in the U.S. in 2011 doubled from the previous year.¹³

Those Copts who remain are made vulnerable to genocide by a lack of representation in Egypt's political, military and security establishments. Copts often live in separate villages or neighborhood, and are easily identified both by their state ID cards, which note the bearer's religion, and by the cross tattoo worn by most Copts on their wrists. In February 2013, Islamist

militias in Benghazi, Libya, rounded up Egyptian Coptic traders in the city, using the ubiquitous wrist tattoo to separate them from their fellows.¹⁴

The current threat to Egyptian Copts is an echo of the fate suffered by Egyptian Jews in the decades following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. A combination of pogroms, terrorist attacks, state persecution and state-ordered expulsions reduced the Egyptian Jewish population from 75,000 in 1948 to virtual non-existence today.¹⁵ However, it should be noted that, unlike Egyptian Jews, Egyptian Christians have no separate state to flee to.

While Christianity is officially recognized and protected by the Egyptian constitution, the Baha'i faith is not, and Egypt's 2,000-member Baha'i community is banned from practicing their faith, enrolling their children in government schools, building houses of worship, and (if married) holding government ID cards. Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood leaders regularly refer to all Baha'is as "apostates" of "Zionist origin" who should be tried for treason.¹⁶

Anti-Coptic propaganda is rife in Egypt, and calls for a genocide of Copts are becoming more open. In September 2010, three months before the massacre at All Saints Church in Alexandria, the Secretary-General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars claimed in an interview on *Al Jazeera* that Copts were storing weapons from Israel in churches, in preparation for "war against the Muslims."¹⁷ A member of the Salafist al-Noor party, which won the second-largest number of seats in Egypt's 2011 parliamentary elections, reportedly claimed that, "As long as Copts are alive, there will never be peace."¹⁸ Leaflets distributed by a jihadi group in Assiut in August 2012 called on Muslims to "kill or physically assault" Christians "in all the governorates of Egypt" until they converted, and brazenly listed a time and public meeting place for new recruits to join up.¹⁹

Christian Solidarity International calls on the international community to:

- Issue a Genocide Alert for Copts and religious minorities in the Arab Republic of Egypt.
- Suspend all forms of military and security aid to the Egyptian government until it takes steps to redress the Maspero massacre, prosecute and punish those who commit sectarian attacks, and protect its Christian and minority populations.
- End all funding for Egyptian institutions that discriminate on the basis of religion.
- Increase support for programs, institutions and parties that promote religious pluralism and tolerance and democratic governance in Egypt.

¹ "Did You Know...Egypt," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, January 28, 2013 <http://www.uscirf.gov/reports-and-briefs/did-you-know/3922.html>

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- ⁵ Michele Clark and Nadia Ghaly, “‘Tell My Mother I Miss Her’: The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt (II),” *Christian Solidarity International*, July 2012
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