

## June 1, 2005: Egypt: Policy Focus on Egypt Presentation at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released Policy Focus on Egypt at an on-the-record event at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. USCIRF Vice Chairs Felice D. Gaer and Nina Shea, and Commissioner Elizabeth Prodromou presented the findings of the Policy Focus and recommendations for U.S. policy. Prominent Egyptian human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim was the commentator.

In its Policy Focus on Egypt, the Commission expresses serious concern about ongoing violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Egypt, including widespread problems of discrimination and intolerance against members of minority Muslim, Christian, and other religious communities. These concerns have led the Commission to include Egypt on its Watch List again.

The Commission views the strength of the bilateral relationship and repeated calls for reform by the United States as an opportunity for the two countries to increase cooperation significantly to advance protection for the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights as an important aspect of U.S. policy to promote freedom and democracy in the greater Middle East.

Commission recommendations include that the U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to:

- Establish a timetable and specific steps to be taken to make progress on political and legal reforms. If the deadlines are met in a timely manner, the U.S. government should consider, within the boundaries of its overall aid to Egypt, providing economic assistance to areas where significant progress had been made. If deadlines are not met, the United States should reconsider the dimensions and direction of its economic

assistance;

- Shift de facto

responsibility from religious affairs from the state security services, with the exception of cases involving violence, and establish an entity or position (e.g., an ombudsman) in the office of the President to oversee religious affairs in Egypt;

- Allow full access to the constitutional and

international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating Section 98 (f) of the Penal Code, which "prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife," instead of having those cases heard by the State Security Courts;

- Repeal the 19th century, Ottoman-era Hamayouni Decree

- which requires non-Muslims to obtain a Presidential decree to build a new place of worship - and ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient criteria and procedures for construction and maintenance;

- More actively investigate societal violence against

any individuals or groups on the basis of their religion, particularly the targeting of Coptic Orthodox Christians, to bring those responsible for such violence to justice, and to ensure compensation for those targeted;

- Take all appropriate steps to prevent and punish acts

of anti-Semitism, including condemnation of anti-Semitic acts, and, while vigorously protecting freedom of expression, counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities; and

- Repeal a 1960 presidential decree banning the Baha'i community from practicing their faith.

Policy Focus on Egypt will be available on the Commission's web site at [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov) at noon today and may also be obtained by contacting the Commission's Communications Department at [communications@uscirf.gov](mailto:communications@uscirf.gov) or (202) 523-3240, ext. 38.