

I want to thank Mr. Adel Guindy and Coptic Solidarity for giving me the opportunity to speak briefly this afternoon about the status of religious freedom in Egypt and the recommendations our Commission is offering to address this serious situation.

Since its inception nearly 15 years ago, USCIRF has been deeply engaged on Egypt and for good reason:

For our entire existence, and indeed, prior to our creation, religious freedom conditions, including those of Egypt’s Coptic population, have been extremely concerning.

From the evidence we’ve seen, the biggest problem faced by the Copts continues to be one of impunity. Simply stated, for decades, Egypt’s government has fostered a climate conducive to acts of violence against Copts and members of other minority communities.

It has done so in at least two ways.

First, Cairo’s long history of restrictive laws and policies -- from blasphemy codes to an Emergency Law to across-the-board discrimination -- has drawn unwelcome attention to religious minorities, further marginalizing them and leading to violent words and deeds launched by intolerant individuals as well as by radical religious groups.

Second, the government’s continued failure to protect innocent people from these attacks and to convict those responsible has served to encourage further assaults.

For years, President Mubarak’s government tolerated widespread discrimination against religious minorities and disfavored religious groups, from dissident Sunni and Shi’a Muslims to

Baha'is, as well as Copts and other Christians, while allowing state-controlled media and state-funded mosques to deliver incendiary messages against them.

After Mubarak's departure, a breakdown in security and a rise in sectarian violence made 2011 one of the worst years for Copts and other minorities.

Last year alone, violent sectarian attacks killed approximately 100 people, surpassing the death toll of the previous 10 years combined. As during the Mubarak regime, Copts were the primary target, and most of the perpetrators still have not been brought to justice.

This is intolerable.

Last October, Egypt's state media falsely accused Copts of attacking the military when Muslim and Christian protestors marched toward the state television station. Following the state media's call on civilians to counter this imaginary threat, on October 9, in downtown Cairo, armed men attacked peaceful demonstrators, killing at least 26 of them, most of them Copts, while injuring over 300 more.

Responding to the violence, Egypt's military used live ammunition and also deployed armored vehicles that deliberately crushed and killed at least 12 protestors.

This is not to say there has been no progress since the end of the Mubarak regime. To be sure, we have seen some hopeful developments.

Last year, Al-Azhar University published statements expressing support for freedom of religion or belief. In May of last year, the government began to reopen more than 50 churches that had been closed, in some cases for years.

Last July, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that reconverts to Christianity could obtain new national identity documents indicating their Christianity but not their former Muslim faith.

And following the October violence, the transitional government took steps to reduce discrimination in Egypt’s Penal Code.

Yet the despite this progress, the bottom line is this:

Copts need to be protected, Copts aren’t being protected, and Copts must be protected -- along with every other member of Egyptian society -- from attacks on their right to order their lives and practice their beliefs in dignity and peace. So long as Copts and other religious minorities aren’t being sufficiently protected, USCIRF will continue to spotlight the problem and recommend that the U.S. government take strong action in support of religious freedom.

Our recommendations to the United States government are as follows:

First, the United States should press Egypt to improve religious freedom conditions, by repealing discriminatory decrees against religious minorities, removing religion from official identity documents, abolishing the blasphemy codes, and passing a unified law for the construction and repair of places of worship.

Second, the United States should urge Egypt’s government to prosecute government-funded clerics, government officials, or any other individuals who incite violence, while disciplining or dismissing government-funded clerics who preach intolerance and hatred.

Third, the United States should increase pressure on Egypt to bring to justice those who have committed violence against fellow Egyptians on account of their religion.

Fourth, Washington should press Cairo to include robust protections for religious freedom in a new constitution.

Fifth, the U.S. Congress should require the Departments of State and Defense to report every 90 days on the Egyptian government’s progress pertaining to religious freedom and related

rights.

Sixth, until genuine progress occurs, USCIRF renews its call for the United States to designate Egypt a “country of particular concern” as one of the world’s most serious religious freedom abusers.

And finally, if Egypt demonstrates a commitment to progress on freedom of religion and related rights, the United States should ensure that a portion of its military aid to Egypt be used to help Egypt’s police implement a plan to enhance protection for religious minorities and their places of worship.

Today, as Egypt confronts the rigors of democratic transition, will it uphold the rights of Copts and other religious minorities?

The world is watching, and USCIRF is watching too.

Thank you.