

TESTIMONY BY

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ON BEHALF OF

THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

GIVEN BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE

AT THE HEARING ENTITLED

ESCALATING VIOLENCE AGAINST COPTIC WOMEN AND
GIRLS: WILL THE NEW EGYPT BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN
THE OLD?

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Helsinki Commission on “Escalating Violence against Coptic Women and Girls: Will the New Egypt be More Dangerous than the Old?” I have been asked today to give an overview about the general status of and conditions for religious freedom in Egypt, especially for Coptic Christians. I request that my statement be entered into the record.

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 problematic. This situation continues into the present and with the election of Mohammed Morsi, the first freely elected President of Egypt, on June 30. The Egyptian transitional government continues to engage in and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Discriminatory and repressive laws and policies remain that restrict freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. Given these concerns, and for the second year in a row, USCIRF recommended in its 2012 Annual Report that Egypt be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). I also request that USCIRF’s 2012 Annual Report chapter on Egypt be entered into the record.

From the evidence we have seen, the biggest problem faced by the Copts, who comprise about 10 to 15 per cent of Egypt’s 80 million people, 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. The consequences of the climate of impunity are especially apparent in Upper Egypt.

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: perpetrators have not been convicted or alleged perpetrators have been detained for short periods, but eventually released without charge. While USCIRF’s 2012 Annual Report chapter on Egypt includes a list of some of the most tragic acts of violence committed against the Coptic Orthodox community, let me note the following significant incident: 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.

In addition, reports in recent years support claims that there were cases of Muslim men forcing Coptic Christian women to convert to Islam. The State Department has asserted that such cases are often disputed and include "inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape." For example, there were credible cases in which Coptic girls voluntarily converted to Islam to marry Muslim men, and subsequently, when the relationship failed, sought to return to Christianity. Nevertheless, during the reporting period, experts and human rights groups have found that there were also credible cases where Coptic Christian women were lured deceptively into marriages with Muslim men and forced to convert to Islam. According to these reports, if a woman returns or escapes from the marriage and wants to convert back to Christianity, she faces the same legal hurdles in changing her religious affiliation on official identity documents as discussed above.

In recent years, in response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities have conducted "reconciliation" sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compelled victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. USCIRF has stated that reconciliation efforts should not be used to undermine enforcing the law and punishing perpetrators for wrongdoing. In recent years, the State Department concluded that reconciliation sessions not only "prevented the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution" but also "contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults."

For all Christian groups, government permission is required to build a new church or repair an existing one, and the approval process for church construction is time-consuming and inflexible. Former President Mubarak had the authority to approve applications for new construction of churches. Although most of these applications were submitted more than five years ago, the majority have not received a response. Even some permits that have been approved cannot, in fact, be acted upon because of interference by the state security services at both the local and national levels.

In 2005, former President Mubarak devolved authority to approve the renovation and reconstruction of churches from the president to the country's governors. Several years later, some churches continue to face delays in the issuance of permits. Even in cases where approval to build or maintain churches has been granted, many Christians complain that local security services have prevented construction or repair, in some cases for many years. In addition, local security services have been accused of being complicit in inciting violence against some churches undergoing routine maintenance or repair. In recent years, the government repeatedly has pledged, most recently in October 2011, to adopt a new law that would apply to all places of worship. In June, after consulting with religious leaders and other experts, the SCAF released publicly a draft version of the law. The draft was criticized widely by Muslims, Christians, and Egyptian human rights groups. While a subsequent version has not been made public, some

reports have indicated that the revised draft law covers only churches and not other places of worship.

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, the Grand Sheikh at Al-Azhar began several initiatives 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 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.

As 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 is

used to help Egypt's police implement a plan to enhance protection for religious minorities, their places of worship, and places where they congregate.

Today, as Egypt confronts the rigors of democratic transition, will it uphold the rights of Copts and other religious minorities? The world is watching, the Helsinki Commission is watching, and USCIRF is watching, too. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.