



ATLANTIC COUNCIL

IDEAS. INFLUENCE. IMPACT.

**Prepared Statement of**

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**before the**

**United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**on**

**“From Arab Spring to Coptic Winter: Sectarian Violence and the Struggle for Democratic  
Transition in Egypt”**

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**2:00 p.m.**

**Cannon House Office Building, Room 210**

**Washington, D.C.**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Cardin, distinguished members:

Thank you for the honor of testifying before the Commission.

After the celebrations of Muslim-Christian unity that Tahrir Square witnessed during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution early this year, it is disappointing to see that sectarian tensions have escalated dangerously in the intervening months, leading to dozens of deaths, hundreds of injuries, and a spreading sense of fear among Egyptian Christians. The violence is not, unfortunately, particularly surprising, because it is to be expected that in a post-revolutionary climate all of the tensions and conflicts that were beneath the surface will emerge more openly.

Sectarian tensions have been present for decades and were already rising noticeably in the months before the January 25 revolution. One of the most disturbing sectarian attacks in years—the bombing of a church in Alexandria in which 23 people died—took place on January 1, following weeks of escalating anti-Christian demonstrations by Salafi Muslims.

This clear and disturbing trend makes it all the more difficult to understand why the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), entrusted by Egyptians with authority upon the forced resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak, has failed to address sectarian violence in any effective manner. The SCAF's approach has been almost identical to that of the Mubarak era; that is, after each sectarian incident the authorities promise to investigate and prosecute crimes vigorously and to address the underlying causes of the incident, such as discriminatory laws regarding the building and alteration of places of worship. But as soon as public attention moves on, such efforts are either abandoned or long delayed, leaving the victims with a sense of injustice and the perpetrators with a sense of impunity, and sowing the seeds of further violence.

Investigations of several incidents of large-scale anti-Christian violence (the January 1 Alexandria bombing as well as clashes in March and April in Cairo, and the October 9 Maspero incident) are ongoing and might well be inconclusive. With more than 75 people dead in these and other incidents in 2011, there has not as yet been a single conviction on charges of murder or manslaughter. In cases where military or government officials are accused of complicity in violence or at least irresponsibility in dealing with it—such as the October 9 incident in which Egyptian state media incited citizens to confront peaceful demonstrators and soldiers ran over them in armored vehicles—the SCAF has staunchly resisted accountability.

The transitional authority supervised by the SCAF also has been slow to make promised legal changes to address the causes of violence. After a May 2011 attack on a church in Cairo, the authorities promised to pass a new law on construction of places of worship. The draft has languished in various forms for months, while many new instances of violence (including the Maspero incident in October) have broken out due to inter-communal tensions surrounding the building or renovation of church facilities. An anti-discrimination law was finally issued in the aftermath of the October violence; it is yet to be seen whether it will be applied.

Anti-Christian violence is one of several serious internal Egyptian problems (rising crime, for example, and a deteriorating economy) with which the SCAF has shown itself to be unwilling or unable to deal. As a military organization, the SCAF is not equipped to address such issues and should not be called upon to do so, particularly for a prolonged period. That is why it is essential that the SCAF agree to a clear, realistic timetable to turn not only legislative but also executive authority over to elected civilians.

The problem now is that the SCAF is trying to postpone the transfer of executive authority until it secures guarantees of its status post-elections; and the status it is seeking is not simply a continuation of the extensive political influence and economic perquisites it enjoyed during the Mubarak era, but more than that. The SCAF has sponsored a document of supraconstitutional principles that would give it the implicit right to intervene in politics and the explicit right to overrule legislation, as well as freedom from civilian supervision or budgetary oversight. What this would produce is a political system similar to that of Pakistan, where elected civilian institutions are relatively powerless while unelected and unaccountable military and intelligence services actually run the country. And as we know from Pakistan as well as from Egypt's own history and current situation that in such a system military and intelligence organizations often manipulate sectarian tensions and extremist tendencies within the country in order to serve narrow agendas.

That would be a very unhappy outcome of the January 25 revolution for all Egyptians, including Egyptian Christians, and also for the United States, which cannot escape partial responsibility for the actions of the SCAF due to the tens of billions in military assistance it has provided. The United States should stand unambiguously on the side of development of a real democratic system in which the rights of all citizens are protected in a climate of free political competition and the rule of law.

Only in a democratic system will difficult issues such as anti-Christian violence and discrimination be able to be addressed openly. This will not happen overnight; building a strong Egyptian democracy will be the project of many years. But it would be a serious mistake to create large new obstacles now by acquiescing to the expansion and formalization of military privileges out of fear that Islamists might gain a plurality, or even a majority, in the parliament to be elected over the next few months. There are many uncertainties involved when freely elected civilian institutions have real power; one thing that is already known for certain is that military rulers will fail to protect all citizens and enforce laws without discrimination.