

**Kidnapped and Converted**  
**Protecting the Rights Coptic Women and Girls in the New Egypt**

Hearing at the Helsinki Commission  
United States Congress

***“The Strategy of subduing a community by terrorizing its  
women”***

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission of the United States Congress,

Thank you for inviting me to testify today before this august body on the highly provocative and compelling issue of ongoing violence against Coptic women in Egypt, in the form of kidnappings, rape and forced religious conversions.

**1. Violence Against Coptic Women in Egypt**

As many experts have already testified before this prestigious forum over the past few years, and last year in particular, individual acts of violence against Egyptian Coptic women, both individually and collectively, have been unrelenting, repetitive, and directed almost exclusively at young single women at of marriage age or under.

This violence, which is described in several reports already submitted to your commission, committees in the House and Senate, as well as to international legislatures that include the European Parliament, House of Lords, and French National Assembly, reveal some disturbing trends:

- a. The attacks have been ongoing for more than three decades, with peaks in some years.
- b. The victims are primarily young Christian women.
- c. Egyptian security and judicial authorities have not helped the families of these girls by trying to rescue or recover them.
- d. An overwhelming majority of the kidnappings and violence have been carried out by individuals and groups who claim to be acting on their belief in an ideology, a doctrine, a set of fundamental beliefs known as Salafism or Jihadism which they claim is the strict implementation of shariah laws.

- e. An overwhelming majority of these crimes have been dismissed by government security and justice institutions, and the radical factions have been protecting the perpetrators, assigning blame to the female victims and their families.
- f. Violence against young Christian women in Egypt has continued after the downfall of the previous regime, and formation of the current alternative Government and its institutions.

These findings prompt the following questions:

- a. Have the attacks been widespread and consistently over time? Is the history of these attacks reflective of the legal and security status of the Coptic Christian community?
- b. Is the violence committed by an organized movement or by individuals who claim to be acting on behalf of an ideological movement?
- c. Does the attitude of government security, judicial, and political institutions reflect cooperation with the attackers, or at least neglect of a segment of Egyptian society?
- d. What are the consequences of the continuous attacks against Coptic females, and thus the Coptic community, despite the regime change and rise of new institutions in Egypt?
- e. What can and should the United States Government, particularly the Administration, to put an end to these violent practices against the women of the Christian Coptic community?

Answering these questions will equip members of the Commission and thus of Congress with the perspective needed to understand the exact nature of the crisis and make informed recommendations regarding possible new legislation and alternative policies for adoption by the Executive Branch.

## **2. The nature of the attacks**

According to prior research submitted to your commission and other Congressional committees and legislatures around the world, targeted attacks against Coptic Christian women are not unrelated and isolated acts of violence. On the contrary, kidnapping and forcing captive women to convert to Islam has been documented for decades, revealing hundreds of victims each year. Research and Coptic sources claim that violence against Coptic women has been practiced since before the rise of modern Egypt. Research also confirms at that this abuse was documented for at least the last decade, especially in the past five years. Therefore, the first characteristic of the crisis is its longstanding history.

This means that any solution to the problem must address its historical roots and scope of the violence. Christian Coptic women and girls have been forced from their homes, streets, and neighborhoods prior to and after the Arab Spring, before and after 9/11, and before and after the Cold War ended. Accordingly, this phenomenon is part a larger global crisis that has stricken the Coptic community under varying governments and regimes. This community, as research and previous hearings have demonstrated, is facing global pressure from extremist elements in the Jihadist and Islamist movements, particularly the Salafists, for years, if not for decades. The attacks against Christian Coptic women and the Christian Coptic community coincide in time line and are consistent with the motives with the acts of violence perpetrated against Coptic targets across Egypt at the hands of extremist elements from *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* and the Salafists.

As stated earlier, the attacks have targeted the female Coptic community, particularly younger women who are of the age to marry (and in some instances just about) which begs the question about the long range motive and the political identity of the network of perpetrators. The juxtaposition of well-documented attacks against the Coptic community generally, and young women in particular, reveal an historical pattern of violence against several segments of the Coptic community, including women, youth people, churches and public figures. These actions—also per research, archives and reports—are perpetrated by the same network of militants, from the Jihadi, Salafist and Islamist movements in Egypt.

### **3. The perpetrators**

While research over the past five years has not revealed a well-designed structure that officially takes responsibility for the attacks against Coptic Christian women, it has shown patterns and statements that indicate the existence of a movement that hails from a well-publicized ideology, namely, Salafist or Islamist fundamentalism, or Jihadism. A thorough review of public records in Egypt, online resources, and past reports submitted to Congress and other legislative bodies around the world, and interviews with the families of the kidnapped victims, reveals a clear picture of the group behind the acts of violence. In almost all cases, the kidnappers argued that their actions were legitimized and inspired by Salafist and jihadist principles. One central tenet of those principles is that individuals -in this case, females- who convert from Christianity to Islam cannot revert back to their original religion, must accept their (forced marriage). In some cases, families of the victims were asked to pay a tribute to recover their daughters.

The reference to Islamist or jihadist views, applicable to Christian Copts in general and women and girls in particular, shows that the acts perpetrated against them and their communities are ideologically and politically motivated, and carried out by men—in some cases with the help of females— are not necessarily formally linked to one central organization. But the hundreds of acts of violence have one pattern in common: a

reference to the legitimacy of the violent action. While forbidden by Egyptian law, kidnapping and converting Coptic females was defended by the Salafists as an acceptable behavior. The supporters of such violence often indicate that the girls or women have been open to such conversion or have since accepted it, thus legitimizing the original illegal act of kidnapping. The repetition of the same arguments and scenarios indicates that the movement behind these practices, Salafists, Islamist Fundamentalists, and Jihadists, perceives their actions to be acceptable as a matter of policy and doctrine, thus inspiring more perpetrators to engage in the practice.

#### **4. Government failure and Collaboration**

In parallel, reports by human rights groups as well as Coptic community and liberal Egyptian NGOs, have openly accused local Egyptian police and security forces, national security agencies, including the defunct state security agency “amn al dawla,” of either covering up the attacks, or protecting the perpetrators. Human rights and Coptic Christian reports and media describe the assistance provided to kidnappers by security police is exhibited in the rough and negative attitude displayed toward the families of the victims.

The historical timeline of security collaboration with the perpetrators or at a minimum, non-support to the victims and their families, also coincides with the timeline of similar aggressive behavior against the community as a whole. The behavior of state agencies towards the issue of Coptic women and rape, kidnapping and forced conversion has been an element of a wider violence committed against churches, schools or other actors in the Coptic community.

Coptic activists and NGOs –including the Washington DC based Coptic Solidarity International- have accused Egyptian security services under the Mubarak regime, of using Salafists to conduct attacks against Coptic targets to maintain the community under the protection of the government. Coptic and liberal Egyptian NGOs have argued that the new security agencies formed after the collapse of the Mubarak regime continue to allow these practices or help the perpetrators.

#### **5. Consequences of attacks against Coptic women**

If the aggression targeting Christian Coptic women continues and widens, without a determined and massive intervention by the Egyptian Government to put an end to this practice, there will be serious consequences on Egyptian Christian women, their communities, and Egyptian women in general, leading to a weakening of civil society and a dramatic setback to freedom, human rights and democracy in Egypt. The chief consequence of unchecked aggressions against Coptic women the terror it has instilled in the hearts of Christian women who count for at least half of the fifteen or so million Christian Copts of Egypt. The hundreds of repetitive attacks against Coptic women send a clear signal to millions of young women in Egypt who feel targeted by the jihadists and

Salafists, compelling them to limit their movement, narrow their social circles, and separate them from Muslim communities. Violence against Coptic women leads to a de-facto gender apartheid in Egypt, where Christian women will be increasingly deterred from finding jobs, expressing their opinion, wearing their own preferred outfits and circulating in public spaces.

The effects on Coptic women will also extend to the entire Christian community as half of its members are increasingly intimidated by acts of violence committed on hundreds of young women. When one segment of community is terrorized, it reverberates throughout their families and communities, forcing the collective into mental ghettos or incentivizing emigration. Rape, abduction and forced conversion are among the root causes of a general sentiment among Copts that pushes thousands of them to flee the country of their ancestors. The ultimate goal of the extremist Salafists of establishment of an Islamist state in Egypt is served by the shrinking Coptic community through emigration. Coptic NGOS, including Coptic Solidarity International claims that Gulf funds and local financial circles sympathetic to Salafism and Wahabism in Egypt have been

Outside the community, the attacks against Coptic Christian women and their results will bring other consequence to bear on secular Egyptian women in general, both liberal and conservative. By failing to protect its Coptic citizens, the Egyptian Government will be perceived as incapable of protecting other segments of the population also targeted by the Salafists and the jihadists. Muslim liberal and secular women, who already fear the strict implementation and enforcement of sharia law, will be under increasing pressures by the most extreme elements of the Islamist movement to wear the Hijab and later, the full Niqab. The attacks on defenseless Coptic women are a mere prelude to a wider campaign to impose its ideological agenda, clearly seen in the Salafist movement as early as 2011.

## **6. The role of the US Government**

The United States Government must use every tool at its disposal to stop the persecution of Coptic Christian women and the marginalization of the Coptic community, and on a larger scale, the danger of apartheid against mainstream women in Egypt, regardless of their religions.

Over the past five years, and particularly since the downfall of President Mubarak, there have been calls for the Administration and Congress to use foreign aid to convince the Egyptian government to intervene against these violent practices. So far, conditioning foreign aid on the respect of human rights in Egypt hasn't been successful in changing policies or realities in Egypt. Also, Congressional readiness to condition foreign aid to Egypt on respect for women and minorities rights hasn't convinced the Administration to adopt this strategy for diplomatic reasons.

We recommend for the Helsinki Commission to adopt the following steps as a way to help protect Coptic women and girls in Egypt from abuse, and defend their universal rights.

- a. Reaffirm the conditions on global US Foreign Aid to Egypt of a constitutional provision announced by the drafters of the new Egyptian constitution, that the practices of abducting, torturing and forcing conversions on Coptic women or any element of society is a terrorist act unequivocally punishable by law.
- b. Make a Congressional declaration that crimes against Coptic women inspired by extremist ideologies targeting communities will be considered crimes against humanity punishable under international law
- c. Partner with Coptic and civil society NGOs, extending financial support directly to these entities as part of the global US Aid to Egypt.
- d. Ensure that the educational and informational system in Egypt, particularly state supported institutions, isn't used to propagate the ideology or precepts used by the perpetrators of the attacks as a way to legitimize violence and discrimination against Coptic women or encourage acts of violence against them .

## **7. Current political situation**

The current political situation in Egypt provides context that should encourage the US Congress to become proactive in helping the US Administration redefine its policy toward Egypt, particularly as minorities and women rights are under attack. For with the arrival of Muslim Brotherhood presidency in M. Mohammed Morsi at helm of the Egyptian republic and with a possible ruling coalition inside the disbanded parliament or the next elected assembly, the ideological agendas of the Islamist movement at large would constitute a greater menace to the liberal segments of civil society and particularly against the Coptic community and its women. Kidnappings and forced conversions have already occurred under the authoritarian but pro-American Government of Mr Mubarak. Under an Islamist authoritarian Government, these practices are highly likely to continue and increase, endangering not only Coptic women but also the rights of Egyptian secular women at large.

It is critical during the transitional period between the Mubarak regime and the future political era, that the United States play a constructive role that ensures balance between all players in Egypt, and particularly in support of the weakest elements of society, namely from the bottom up, Christian women, the Coptic community, Egyptian secular women, youth and the rest of civil society that is committed to pluralist and liberal democracy.