

**From Arab Spring to Coptic Winter: Sectarian Violence and the Struggle for Democratic
Transition in Egypt
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Representative Christopher H. Smith
Tuesday, November 15, 2011**

Good afternoon and welcome to this, our second Helsinki Commission hearing on the volatile and dangerous situation facing the Coptic Christians in Egypt following the Arab Spring.

The world watched with great hope and anticipation as events unfolded in Tahrir Square earlier this year. We saw Christians standing guard over Muslims during Friday prayers in the middle of the square. We saw Muslims standing guard over Christians as they celebrated mass in Tahrir.

While I believe that many of those who came together to forge the revolution want to continue that solidarity as they support Egypt's political transition, sadly, there are those who do not. Indeed, the transition period has seen increasing violence against Coptic Christians. The current Egyptian government, controlled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has not adequately responded to this violence, and as we have seen on video, has perpetrated violence against Coptic protestors.

On Sunday, October 9, 2011, twenty-seven people were killed and more than 300 injured in Maspero when the Egyptian military attacked a peaceful group of Coptic Christians protesting the burning of a church in Aswan. The protestors were also demanding the removal of the governor of Aswan, who had justified the mob's destruction of the church by saying that it had been built without a permit.

In what has been deemed the "Massacre at Maspero," witnesses say the army fired on the demonstrators with live ammunition and plowed into the crowd with armored vehicles. Military officers raided and stopped the live broadcast of two independent news channels that had been covering the clashes. At the same time, State-run television and radio reported that the Coptic demonstrators had attacked the military and called for "honorable citizens" to "defend the army against attack"—inciting violence against the Coptic minority.

Amid widespread domestic and international outrage over the events, the White House issued a statement on October 10 saying that: "The president is deeply concerned about the violence in Egypt that has led to a tragic loss of life Now is the time for restraint on all sides so that Egyptians can move forward together to forge a strong and united Egypt."

With all due respect, the President seems to have completely missed the point. This is not a situation of equal power and equal responsibility for violence. This was not a lawless gang clash on the street, or a mob marauding the streets in the absence of a government. The Coptic community was protesting the fact that the Egyptian government in Aswan failed to protect Coptic property and allowed a mob to burn down the Coptic place of worship.

When Copts called on the military government to treat the Copts as equal citizens and protect their rights, the government itself turned on them with a massacre.

How is this government any different from the Mubarak thug regime? Had this occurred under Mubarak, we would have called for his removal.

This same government is investigating itself for the incident. And the assault on human rights continues.

In fact, the military has arrested at least 28 people—mostly Copts—in connection with the clashes, including prominent blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah. These individuals are being hauled before military prosecutors.

To date, despite multiple videos and eyewitness accounts showing the military's use of lethal violence against peaceful protestors, the Egyptian military has yet to take responsibility for its actions, or otherwise demonstrate that it will protect all Egyptians, including the Coptic minority that make up more than 10% of its population.

According to press reports last week, a member of a government-backed fact-finding committee said that the Egyptian army did not use live ammunition to disperse protestors during the October 9 incident.

However, Hafez Abu Saeda, a senior figure in the government-sponsored National Council for Human Rights which set up the committee, also said that an independent investigation was needed to establish the full facts and that some state institutions, including the army, did not cooperate fully with the committee. Rights activists, including the Arab Network for Human Rights Information and Human Rights Watch, have criticized the report for a lack of detail.

Tragically, the Massacre at Maspero is not an isolated incident, but rather a continuation of the endemic discrimination against, and marginalization of, Coptic Christians in Egypt. According to the 2010 State Department International Religious Freedom Report for Egypt:

“The status of respect for religious freedom by the government remained poor, unchanged from the previous year. Christians and members of the Baha’i Faith, which the government does not recognize, face personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and their ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Coptic Christians and again failed to redress laws—particularly laws relating to church construction and renovation—and governmental practices, especially government hiring that discriminates against Christians, effectively allowing their discriminatory effects and their modeling effect on society to become further entrenched.”

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom notes that, “In response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities typically conduct ‘reconciliation’ sessions between Muslims and Christians as a means of resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compel

victims to abandon their claims to legal remedy. The failure to prosecute perpetrators fosters a climate of impunity.”

A report by the Egyptian Initiative for Human Rights (EIPR) covering the period from January 2008 to January 2010 documented 53 incidents of sectarian violence—about two incidents per month – that took place in 17 of Egypt’s 29 governorates. Most of the attacks were by Muslims on Christians and Christian churches or property.

Egypt will not reach its democratic goals through the oppression of its minority peoples; democracy does not come with an iron fist. Rather, democracy springs from the belief that all people are created equal and have the right to participate in their governance. A legitimate government is of the people, by the people, and for the people—including minorities. A legitimate government submits to the rule of law.

The Egyptians demonstrated this belief in Tahrir Square, but seem to be losing their way—spinning backward into tyrannical abuses of power.

If there is any hope for a democratic and peaceful Egypt, the Copts must be allowed to contribute actively to Egyptian society and to the transformation of their country without fearing for their lives.

In order to further discuss this critical juncture in Egypt’s history, we have with us today a distinguished panel of witnesses who will help us more fully understand the plight of the Coptic Christians and what their status portends for peaceful and democratic political transition in Egypt.

Michael Posner has served as Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and labor since September 2009. Prior to joining the State Department, Mr. Posner was the Executive Director and the President of Human Rights First. He played a key role in proposing and campaigning for the first U.S. law providing for political asylum, which became part of the Refugee Act of 1980. Mr. Posner also has been a prominent voice in support of fair, decent, and humane working conditions in factories throughout the global supply chain. Before joining Human Rights First, Mr. Posner was a lawyer in private practice in Chicago and also lectured at Yale Law School and at Columbia University Law School. He holds a J.D. from the University of California, Berkeley Law School and a B.A. with distinction and honors in history from the University of Michigan.

Dina Guirguis is an Egyptian American democracy activist and attorney and member of the Egyptian American Rule of Law Association (EARLA). Formerly, she was the Keston family research fellow in The Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Project Fikra. She founded and was editor of a near real time Arabic-English blog called Fikra Forum connecting Arab activists with U.S. policymakers on issues of regional political reform. Prior to joining the Institute, Ms. Guirguis was the executive director of Voices for a Democratic Egypt. She has been active in the struggle for democracy and human rights in Egypt beginning with her work at the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, where she remained until the center’s closure by the Egyptian government in 2000. In the United States, Ms. Guirguis has practiced

criminal and corporate law. She holds a J.D. from Vanderbilt University Law School and a B.A. from Wellesley College.

Samuel Tadros is a Research Fellow with the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute. Before joining Hudson in 2011, Mr. Tadros was a Senior Partner at the Egyptian Union of Liberal Youth, an organization that aims to spread the ideas of classical liberalism in Egypt. He previously interned at the American Enterprise Institute and worked as a consultant for both the Hudson Institute on Moderate Islamic Thinkers and the Heritage Foundation on Religious Freedom in Egypt. In 2007 Mr. Tadros was chosen by the State Department in its first Leaders for Democracy Fellowship Program in collaboration with Syracuse University's Maxwell School. He holds an M.A. from Georgetown University and a BA from the American University in Cairo.

Dr. Michele Dunne is Director of the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Dr. Dunne has served in the White House on the National Security Council staff, on the State Department's Policy Planning staff and in its Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and as a diplomat in Cairo and Jerusalem. Prior to joining the Atlantic Council, she was a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where she edited the *Arab Reform Bulletin* and carried out research on Arab politics and U.S. policies. She holds a doctorate in Arabic language and linguistics from Georgetown University, where she has served as a visiting professor of Arab Studies. She co-chairs the Working Group on Egypt, a bipartisan group of experts established in February 2010 to mobilize U.S. government attention to the forces of change in that country.