

Good afternoon and welcome to our hearing on the escalating violence against Coptic women and girls in Egypt following the Arab Spring, including the outrageous crimes of abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage, which the Egyptian government is doing all too little to prevent – if indeed it is doing anything at all.

It has now been almost a year and a half since the revolution began in Egypt, and Egypt is still in the foundry fires of transition – hopefully into a free and democratic state. The Egyptians have elected a parliament, but, because the Muslim Brotherhood contested independent seats, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) dissolved it with the support of the Constitutional Court.

A president, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected and installed—but not before the SCAF, who seem to be mostly secularist, curtailed presidential power over the military and given the military legislative powers.

The Constituent Panel, which was drawn from the now dissolved parliament and has been boycotted by the Coptic Christians, has begun drafting work on Egypt’s new constitution – yet it may be disbanded any day by a pending court decision.

Order seems to hang by a thread and tensions run extremely high. Though Egypt has avoided civil war, the revolution and ongoing unrest and social conflict has already left many casualties in the Coptic community. Sadly, there are groups that would use the ancient Christian Coptic community as a way to build unity around a common enemy.

The SCAF was guilty of this on October 9, 2011, when the military fired on a peaceful group of Coptic Christians at Maspero and ran them over with military vehicles, while calling through the national news service for “honorable citizens” to “defend the army against attack” – that is, the SCAF openly incited violence against the Coptic minority.

Twenty-seven people were killed and more than 300 injured – almost all of them were Copts. The military claim that one soldier was killed but it refuses to release his name. Almost a year later, protestors are on trial for the incident, and three soldiers have been charged with misdemeanors.

Today Michele Clark will present her new report on the disappearance, forced marriages, and forced conversions of Coptic women. The vulnerability and abduction of the Coptic Christians is not a new problem. Going back to the 1970s there are many accounts of Coptic women and girls being abducted by Muslims, forcibly converted, and forcibly married. No doubt in some cases women chose to elope, marry across religious lines, and cut off relations with their family.

But the claim of the Egyptian government that this is in fact what happened to every one of the thousands of disappeared women and girls defies massive and carefully collected evidence. The women and girls who are found often claim to have been drugged and kidnapped, or kidnapped with violence. They report human rights abuses including forced conversion, rape, forced marriage, beatings, and domestic servitude.

Alarming, since the revolution, cases of reported disappearance have increased, while recovery of the women and girls have decreased.

Those women who are found and returned to their families face many obstacles – including government refusal to assist in their return, to prosecute their kidnappers, and to change their identify cards to reflect their return to their Christian faith, which seems to sanction forced conversions. Nor are we aware of any case, before or after the revolution, in which an abductor has been prosecuted.

President Morsi, in his first speech as President, envisioned Egypt as being for Muslims and Christians. This must mean true justice for Copts. Copts must be given equal protection under the law. The Copts are not asking for special rights but rather that the Egyptian government perform its basic responsibility to protect its citizens and their rights.

Secretary Clinton was in Egypt over the weekend, and some of those demonstrating were Copts carrying signs that said, “Obama, don’t send your dollars to Jihadists.” Congress sent a similar message with the 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act, which required the Secretary to certify that Egypt was making improvements in religious freedom before we released the \$1.3 billion in aid.

An unnamed senior State Department official reported to Reuters that, “On the basis of America's national security interests, she (Clinton) will waive legislative conditions related to Egypt's democratic transition, allowing for the continued flow of 'Foreign Military Financing' to Egypt...the move reflects our overarching goal: to maintain our strategic partnership with an Egypt made stronger and more stable by a successful transition to democracy.”

My response to that official is simply this: in Egypt, Coptic women and girls are not now protected and free to live their lives without fear of abduction, forced conversion, and other abuses of their human rights. Our policy should be to stand with them, and to every tool in our policy kit to encourage the Egyptian government to do the same.