

**Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
(U.S. Helsinki Commission)**

**Testimony of Samuel Tadros, Research Fellow, Hudson Institute's Center for
Religious Freedom**

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

November, 15, 2011

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this timely and important hearing and for inviting me to testify today on the plight of Egypt's Christians and what it signifies for the prospects of a democratic transition in Egypt.

The title of today's hearing suggests a linkage between religious freedom, or more precisely the lack thereof and the prospects of democracy in Egypt. Unfortunately this linkage has been often ignored by policy makers. The modern debasement of the concept of a free society to mean, essentially, the holding of elections has blinded many to the importance of religious freedom to the health and survival of free societies.

The recent massacre of Copts on the 9th of October, while certainly significant in terms of the number of victims and the manner of their deaths, should not blind us to the fact that it is only a continuation of a previous pattern. Attempting to deal with the massacre and propose solutions without recognizing that pattern, would limit our understanding and as a result our proposed remedies.

Previously, before the revolution, Copts were facing three distinct threats, from Islamists, the government and the general population. Each entity has its own internal considerations and goals that help to diminish religious freedom, but it is the dynamic relationship between them that creates ongoing cycles of intolerance and discrimination.

The Islamist threat took the form of direct violent attacks on Copts conduct by terrorist organizations. The recent Alexandria Church bombing on New Year's Eve is a stark reminder of the threat that they pose.

The government itself engaged in rampant discrimination. Ottoman-era laws restricting the building of churches remained in force. Christians were excluded

from important government positions. Egypt's Christian heritage was not mentioned in schoolbooks, and Copts were almost completely absent from the political landscape. Attacks against Copts almost always went unpunished.

Most worrisome of all, in recent years, has been the spate of attacks by ordinary Muslims on their Christian neighbors. Starting with the massacre in El-Kosheh in January 2000, recent attacks usually have not been orchestrated by Islamist groups, but have been the result of ordinary Muslims' anger at something they see as an affront to Islam's domination and supremacy in the land of Islam: the resumption of work on an old church, the building of a new one, a rumor of a sexual relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman, or a report of a suspected lack of respect for Islam shown by a Christian. The incident usually involves a Muslim mob's attacking Christian homes and shops, ransacking, burning, and, in some cases, killing.

The Mubarak government's reaction to such attacks only encouraged them further. The police never arrived in time to stop the violence, and when they did, they usually simply arrested a couple of dozen local residents, Christians and Muslims alike. The arrested Christians would serve as a bargaining chip that the government would use to force the church to keep quiet. Faced with possible harsh sentences for their people, the clergy felt that their hands were tied. They were made to participate in government-organized reconciliation sessions that gathered local Christian and Muslim clergymen and other notables, the result of which was to force the Christians to drop all charges. These gatherings would also, usually, pass some sentence on the Christian community for its apparent affront — e.g., the family of a Christian man rumored to be involved sexually with a Muslim woman might be forced to emigrate from the village and pay compensation, or the Copts might be forced to abandon building a church and instead conduct their worship in an unmarked house.

As Egyptians took to the streets in January and February of this year, calling for an end to the regime's authoritarian grip on power, some observers were hopeful that the fall of a regime would bring about a change in the sectarian problem in Egypt. Egypt seemed headed to a transition to democracy and images of Christians and Muslims protesting together as well as praying in Tahrir Square created a false optimism on the direction that Egypt was taking.

Reality soon became hard to ignore.

Instead of bringing about change, the past few months have shown a reinforcement of pattern of religious discrimination and a substantial increase in the number of attack on Christians. These new attacks involved the same three responsible parties. Islamists, freed from any restraining check of the police, are now free to enforce their vision on Egyptian society at large and Copts in particular. This enforcement takes the shape both of planned attacks led by Salafis and joined by the local mob, such as the May attacks on churches in the Imbaba neighborhood of Cairo, and of daily persecutions that though mostly escaping the attention of the press, represent the most alarming aspect the threats facing Copts. Increasingly, Copts living in poorer neighborhoods find themselves forced to abide by certain Islamic practices or face possible punishment. In some cases, Christian girls in government schools have been forced to wear the hijab by the Islamist headmasters, who are now free from government control. In a very disturbing incident, on October 16th, Ayman Nabil Labib, a 17-year-old Christian student was asked by his teacher to remove the cross tattooed on his wrist and the one he was wearing around his neck. When he refused, the teacher was angered and started beating him; his Muslim classmates joined in the beating, which resulted in his death.

The government, meanwhile, evinces a continued lack of interest in protecting Christians. The solution of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the burning of a church in Atfih in March was to invite Salafi preacher Mohamed Hassan to try to cool down the local Muslims. Appearing on national TV later, however, he explained that the attack was not sectarian in nature, but was driven by the discovery of black magic conducted in the church. No attackers were ever punished. After an attack on a church in Aswan on September 30, the local governor actually encouraged the attackers: He declared on TV that the Christians were to blame for a building violation and that "our boys" had corrected the wrongdoing. As a result, a culture of impunity has been created. Realizing that they will never be punished for their actions, people are emboldened to attack Christians.

When international and local pressure for action becomes high, the government resorts to the old tactic of arresting Christians and using them as a bargaining ship with the Church leadership. Following the recent attack at Maspero, the government arrested a number of young Christians. They remain jailed as we speak.

Most worrisome for the future of Christians in Egypt is the participation of the general Muslim population in these attacks. It is important to note here that those

attacks are not driven by a desire to kill Christians. The goal remains for Christians to live, permanently, as second-class citizens. Any attempt by the Copts to break the chains of Dhimmitude and act as equals is seen as an affront to the supremacy of Islam in its own land. What fueled the attack on the Aswan church, for example, was not that Christians wanted to pray; they can do so, as long as the building in which they do so is not a church. The local Muslims' demands were that the building have no bells, no microphones, no crosses, and no domes. What instigated the attacks on the Christians during their march, before they were killed by the army, was their chants of "Raise your head up high, you are a Copt" and their raised crosses. In the new Egypt, you can exist as a Copt, but you are not allowed to be proud of that fact. You will be allowed to survive, but you must show your submission to the religion of the majority and recognize your inferior status.

Faced with these growing threats, it is no surprise that the Copts are questioning whether there is a future for them in the new Egypt. Isolated and ignored by the West, the Copts can only wonder today whether, after 2,000 years, the time has come for them to pack their belongings and leave, as Egypt looks less hospitable to them than ever. Like the Jewish communities scattered in Europe during the Middle Ages, the Copts are realizing the eternal lesson of minorities' survival: Better the persecuting ruler than the mob. A ruler can be bought off or constrained by international pressure; with a mob there are no constraints.

Most importantly elections are not likely to provide any remedy to their predicament. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the more extremist Salafists poses an unprecedented threat to the Copts. With the Islamists all but guaranteed to control the next Egyptian Parliament, a culture of impunity is about to become a culture of encouragement.

As recent events have shown, the Copts refuse to accept the inferior status. They refuse simply to disappear, as many ancient communities in the Middle East have done in the last century. They will continue to raise their heads up high with their crosses, but they will not succeed. Neither is Egypt's geography or demographic distribution in their favor.

Neither is immigration. While the intensified pressure and attacks are likely to result in a large wave of emigration, the sheer numbers involved make the complete immigration of the community unfeasible regardless of its undesirability. The most fortunate will take the first planes to the U.S., Canada, and Australia, but a community of 8-10 million people cannot possibly emigrate en masse in a short

time. The poorer Copts, the ones who face daily persecution, will be left behind. For them, the winter has already arrived, and it will be cold and long.

For those concerned about Egypt's future and the prospect of a transition to democracy, defending religious freedom remains the only solution. The ballot box offers no magical solution. It is merely a tool. Building a truly free society is like Edmund Burke wrote no easy task, for a free society is one where religious freedom and free enterprise provide the foundation on which democracy can be built.

Egypt remains a key ally and friend of the United States. The direction that Egypt will take will have ramifications on the surrounding countries and as such is of vital importance to the United States national security. There is no question that the United States has at its disposal numerous tools to positively affect the transition in Egypt. The real question is whether it is willing.

The following steps are essential to take:

- Last week's announcement by the head of the military courts that both civilians and military personal are being tried for the Maspero massacre offers the first admission by the Military that something went wrong at that incident and that they lost control of their soldiers. Punishment for those responsible for the massacre should be a first step in dealing with the incident.
- The parliamentary elections in Egypt will not result in any significant Christian representation. Nevertheless Christian participation in the Constitution writing process should be stressed. The new Egyptian Constitution must offer religious freedom for its citizens and equality for all Egyptians regardless of their religion.
- As according to the existing electoral timetable, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces will continue to rule and govern Egypt for at least 1 year, and with the collapse of the police, the army is likely to continue being used for basic policing and law and order for some time to come. Not having gone through any policing training, they have shown a lack of ability to deal with such tasks. The US military has developed excellent manuals and built tremendous experience in providing law and order in conflict zones. With its strong ties to the Egyptian military, the U.S. Army can help provide them with necessary trainings.
- While the United States through the State Department and the USAID is providing numerous grants to strengthen democracy in Egypt, there have

been disturbing reports recently that some of this money is being provided to Islamist parties and groups, whose commitment to religious freedom is doubtful. Oversight of this funding should ensure that this money is only given to groups committed to religious freedom.

- Copts, like their fellow countrymen are discovering democracy for the first time. They are challenged to organize quickly to be able to have a voice in their country's future. The U.S. must ensure that amongst the groups that it funds, adequate attention and funding is provided to Coptic groups that attempt to organize politically.

Thank you once again for organizing and chairing this hearing and for inviting me to testify.