1 Please provide an update on the attitude towards and treatment of Coptic Christians by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, particularly those engaged in proselytisation, in Egypt.

Background

According to a number of sources, Islamists seek to make Egypt an Islamic society based on a conservative interpretation of Shari’a law. The major Islamist groups in Egypt include the moderate Muslim Brotherhood and more violent groups, such as al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group) and al-Gihad (Holy War/Islamic Jihad). The two latter groups were responsible for violent attacks on Coptic Christians in the 1990s.1

Attitude and treatment of Coptic Christians by the Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood have offered ambiguous statements in regards to their view of Coptic Christians as part of their vision of an Islamic state but have recently sought open dialogue with the Coptic community. There were no recent reports of mistreatment of Coptic Christians by members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s main political reform is the introduction of Shari’a law in Egypt and its main slogan is “Islam is the Solution”. Yet Coptic sources claim this vision excludes “infidels” such as Christians and Jews.2 A number of sources also state that the Muslim Brotherhood has been unclear in their public position on Copts. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have made ambiguous and often conflicting statements such as whether a Copt can become President and hold senior posts in the state and army and whether or not Copts should pay the traditional poll tax levied on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule.3 At the

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same time the group has offered conciliatory statements such as “They (Christians) have the same rights as we do and the same duties as we do” and shown an interest in engaging the Coptic community in open dialogue. Therefore, the Muslim Brotherhood’s attitude towards the Coptic Christian community remains unclear.

A number of sources state the Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence in the 1970s. It has also made public denouncements following recent incidents of Muslim attacks on Coptic Christians. Though one news article claimed that Muslim Brotherhood members at Helwan University ‘pester’ Christian students, no other information was found to corroborate this. No other information on the attitude and treatment towards Coptic Christians by low level Brotherhood members and supporters were found as most sources of information regarding the Muslim Brotherhood refer to the activities and pronouncements of its leaders. Human rights reports on the treatment of Coptic Christians also focus most of their analysis on treatment of Copts by the Egyptian authorities.

**Attitude and treatment of Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation by the Muslim Brotherhood**

Very little information could be found on this subject; however, it is arguable that the Muslim Brotherhood would view Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation negatively.

One 2009 news article by the Christian publication, *Compass Direct News*, referred to a bill proposed by parliamentary members affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood which would make apostasy punishable by death. However, no other reference to such a bill could be found in any other source. The lack of information on this subject may be an indication of the Muslim Brotherhood’s avoidance in publicly addressing the issue of apostasy in an attempt to appease the Coptic community. As one article in the *Daily Star Egypt* stated: “Opponents say the Brotherhood has long adopted two different tones depending on its audience: a radical one when addressing pious followers and a more moderate one for the outside world and its traditional domestic foes like Egypt’s Christian minority and secularists.”

The lack of information could also be attributed to a possible lack of reporting of such incidents to local police who would not offer any protection to Coptic Christians in such circumstances (see further detail below regarding state protection).

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Yet, given the Muslim Brotherhood’s political agenda is the imposition of Shari’a law which dictates that apostasy is a ‘grave sin’,¹⁰ it is arguable that the Muslim Brotherhood would view Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation negatively.

**Attitude and treatment of Coptic Christians by other Islamists**

Very little information was found regarding the attitude of other Islamists towards Coptic Christians. One source indicated Islamist university students discriminate against non-Muslims at university though numerous other sources state that Islamists students are the victims of discrimination by government agencies. Though there have been numerous reports of increased violent attacks against Coptic Christians in recent years, it is unclear whether the perpetrators were Islamists.

The 2005 Human Rights Watch report titled “Reading between the ‘Red Lines: The Repression of Academic Freedom in Egyptian Universities’” states:

> Islamists have been accused of intolerance toward classmates….Islamist students at the national universities often harass liberal female classmates for not wearing the niqab, a full veil. Non-Muslims are also victims of this discrimination. The Islamists imply that "all women who do not cover offend God, therefore all Christians offend God. The students feel intimidated," said a Coptic professor from ‘Ain Shams, who has noticed increasing extremism on campus.”¹¹

The Human Rights Watch report was criticized by local Egyptian academics as being overblown and contradictory as the report also discusses in detail how Islamists suffer discrimination in universities.¹² A number of other sources also claim that it is the Muslim Brotherhood student members who are the subject of regular discrimination and mistreatment by government authorities.¹³ These conflicting statements may be an indication that Islamist university students are at times both perpetrators and victims of discrimination by authorities.

A variety of sources claim that Coptic Christians have been regularly attacked in recent years by what has been described as ‘Muslim militants’, ‘Islamic extremists’, ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ and ‘radicalized Muslims’.¹⁴ However, most recent reports of sectarian

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violence towards Copts in Egypt refer to the perpetrators being ‘Muslim mobs’ or ‘Muslims from the area’ as the majority of incidents related to local disputes over land, the construction of churches, retaliation for the death of a Muslim, allegations regarding sexual harassment and alleged romantic relationships between a local Copt and a Muslim. No Islamist group has publicly acknowledged responsibility for these recent attacks and a number of sources state that the majority of members of al-Gama`a al-Islamiyya and al-Gihad renounced violence in the late 1990s. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether recent violence against Coptic Christians was perpetrated by people connected to the ‘Islamist’ cause. Nonetheless, the fact that a local dispute between a Muslim and Coptic Christian could ignite into sudden and often large-scale violence between the two communities lends weight to theories of increasing tension between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt.

Attitude and treatment of Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation by other Islamists

Very little information could be found on the attitude and treatment of Copts engaged in proselytisation by Islamists but it is arguable that Islamists would take a negative view of Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation.

A number of Christian sources claim that Muslim converts to Christianity in Egypt often live in hiding for fear of retaliation from ‘Islamists’ and ‘extremists’. However, no reports were


19 ‘EGYPT: Convert’s religious rights case threatens Islamists’ 2009, Compass Direct News, 12 May – Attachment 14; ‘Egypt’s Christians face fresh attacks and legal battles’ 2009, Christian Today, 10 July
found of attacks on Muslims who had converted to Christianity or on Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation by Islamist groups. This could be attributed to a possible lack of reporting of such incidents to local police who would not offer protection to Coptic Christians in such circumstances as outlined below. However, as noted earlier, if the objective of Islamists is the imposition of Shari’a law which dictates apostasy to be a ‘grave sin’, then it is arguable that Islamists would take a negative view of Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation.

**State Protection for Coptic Christians against Muslim perpetrators**

Numerous sources indicate that the Egyptian authorities do not offer effective protection to Coptic Christians who complain of harassment or attack by Muslim perpetrators. Coptic Christian complainants are often pressured by government authorities to engage in reconciliation sessions and even arrested themselves as a means to avoid prosecuting the alleged Muslim assailants.

A range of recent reports from non-government organisations and government sources claim that despite an increase in violent attacks on Christians by Muslims in recent years, the authorities failed to investigate many incidents. Instead, the Egyptian government often sponsors "reconciliation sessions" which the US Department of State claims “obviated the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution. This practice contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults.” For example, on 5 October 2008, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced a Muslim assailant who stabbed a Copt to death to a one-year suspended sentence following a reconciliation session at which the family of the killer promised to pay indemnity to the victim's family. Similarly, the 2009 US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report stated that, to date, the Government had not prosecuted any of the Bedouin villagers who assaulted a Coptic monastery in May 2008.

There were also a number of reports which claim that governmental authorities regularly detain Copts following sectarian attacks in order to blackmail Coptic authorities to desist from calling for official action to prosecute the perpetrators. For example, the US Copts Association claimed that in July 2009, after a Coptic church had been set on fire by ‘Muslim Extremists’, three Christian villagers filed a report at the police station. The police officers reportedly detained and threatened the Christians to change their statements. In August

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25 ‘EGYPT: Egyptian Church Set on Fire as Gov’t Guards Stand By’ 2009, U.S. Copts Association website, 14 July – Attachment 42.
2009, *Compass Direct News* also reported that two Coptic Christians were arrested by police and held without charge after reporting that they had been beaten by a mob.26

**State protection for Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation**

Numerous sources indicate that the Egyptian authorities do not offer protection at all to Coptic Christians engaged in proselytisation as local authorities regularly detain Christians engaged in such activities.

A number of sources state that while there is no legal ban on proselytizing Muslims, the Egyptian Government restricts such efforts and police have harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.27 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom observed that the Egyptian government uses Article 98(f) of the Penal Code to prosecute such individuals which states:

> Whoever exploits religion in order to promote extremist ideologies by word of mouth, in writing or in any other manner, with a view to stirring up sedition, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity shall be punished with imprisonment between six months and five years or paying a fine of at least 500 Egyptian pounds.28

The last two years saw a number of reports of arrests of Christians suspected of publicly distributing Christian material; however in all cases the detainees were released within a few days without charge.29 In one recent account, on 1 February 2009, local police arrested two Christians at the Cairo International Book Fair who were allegedly distributing free copies of the Bible to book fair patrons for the purpose of proselytizing. The two young men claim that they were tortured with physical blows and electric shocks in the State Security police headquarters in Assyout after they were arrested and forcibly returned to the governorate.30 A number of sources claim that the state carries out such arrests because they think missionary work could ignite sectarian violence and it therefore necessitates control.31

List of Attachments


   American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research website, November


6. Ammar, M. 2007, ‘Brotherhood Says No Women, No Copts To Be Egyptian President’
   Ikhwanweb.com, source: *All Headline News*, 8 November


   (CISNET Egypt CX206013)

9. Engaging Copts is Necessary to Prevent Sectarian Conflicts’ 2008, Ikhwanweb.com, 19 July

10. ‘The Muslim Brotherhood is Pro-Dialogue, Engagement of Women and Copts: Habib’


15. ‘Brotherhood agenda remains a mystery’ 2005, *Daily Star Egypt*, 9 December


31. ‘EGYPT: Two Coptic Christians killed on the eve of Orthodox Pascha’ 2009, Asia News IT, 20 April. (CISNET Egypt 224718)


42. ‘EGYPT: Egyptian Church Set on Fire as Gov’t Guards Stand By’ 2009, U.S. Copts Association website, 14 July. (CISNET Egypt CX231966)


