

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**

Egypt Two Years After Morsi: Part 1

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20 May 2015**

Madam Chairman, Ranking member Deutch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify today on Egypt two years after Morsi.

For the past four and a half years and after decades of political stagnation, the foundations of the political order in Egypt were shaken to their core as the country's citizens struggled with questions of democracy, the rule of law, and the country's identity. In July 2013, following popular protests, the military removed President Morsi from office and promised the Egyptian people not only a new era of stability and security, but also of equal citizenship and prosperity. Following his election to the Egyptian presidency in May 2014, the task of implementing those dreams lies with President Sisi. While Egypt faces enormous political, security and economic challenges, the focus of my testimony today will be on the questions of religious freedom, the rule of law and calls for religious reform. I would be happy to address other aspects of Egypt's challenges in the Q&A session.

On the 26th of March 2015, a mob gathered in the village of El Galaa in Minya governorate and began attacking Christian homes and shops. The mob was incensed that Christians had received a permit to demolish and rebuild their local church, which served 1,400 Copts. With their old church building decaying and their numbers growing, Copts had received a permit in 2004 to build a new larger church, but were continuously prevented from doing so. In January 2015 they sought to avoid a confrontation by attempting to renovate the old one, only to get attacked by the mob. In what has become a recurring practice, the mob demanded that the church would have no outer symbol of Christianity: no dome, no cross, no tower, no bell, and that its entrance be on a side street. Instead of protecting the Copts and upholding the rule of law by allowing the church to be built, the security forces and local authorities forced Copts into a reconciliation session and pressured them to accept the mob's demands. Encouraged by the police's conduct, the mob added a new demand. Copts were to publish an apology in newspapers to local Muslims for complaining informing the media of the attack and thus tarnishing the village's image. Furthermore, Copts were to sign an agreement never to seek to build a new church if the old one was damaged in the future. After Copts refused to accept those demands, the attack was renewed on the 4th of April with rocks thrown at Christian homes and Christian shops were looted. Seven Copts were wound in the attack. In typical fashion, security forces arrested 28 men from the village including 12 Copts. Such practices are intended to pressure Copts to agree to a new reconciliation session. To date, Copts have been prevented from building their church.

Unfortunately this episode in El Galaa village is hardly unique. In the neighboring Al Our village, home to 13 of the Copts beheaded in Libya by ISIS, a mob attacked Coptic homes on the 27th of March in order to similarly prevent a church from being built. That construction of that church had been ordered by President Sisi to honor the Coptic martyrs and as a symbol of a new Egypt where Copts were to be treated as equal citizens. Instead the church became a symbol of an Egypt in which Copts suffer from violence because of their faith and are treated as second class citizens. The mob attack involved rocks and Molotov cocktails. Rather than upholding the rule of law by arresting and prosecuting the attackers, the governor organized a reconciliation session between both communities. Unable to walk back the President's promise, the local authorities forced Copts to accept that the proposed church be banished to the village outskirts. The authorities' actions naturally encouraged the mob further and on the 29th of April, the house of one of the ISIS victims in Libya was attacked.

Similar incidents have taken place in the village of Taleyhat in Sohag governorate on the 11th of April, where the mob was angered by rumors of the church acquiring a dome. The mob was not alone however in attacking Copts. On the 9th of April, security forces prevented Copts from building a church in Abu Qurqas, Minya governorate. On April 4th, security forces attacked a building used by Copts as a church for over a decade in Maghagha confiscating altar equipment and bibles. Bishop Aghathon, in whose diocese the church is located, has publically accused security forces of inciting local Muslims against their Christian neighbors.

Threats to religious freedom are however not limited to violent attacks. Religious minorities such as Copts, Baha'is, and Shias have suffered from a host of official discriminatory policies for decades. These include tremendous restrictions on the building and renovation of churches, exclusion of Christians from key government positions, punishment of converts to Christianity, arrests of Shi'a for practicing their faith, and not refusing to issue government identification cards to Baha'is. While the level of discrimination and persecution has varied under successive regimes, it has been a part of a continued and increasing pattern.

Following the Egyptian revolution of 2011, a new threat emerged in the form of blasphemy accusations with subsequent verdicts in cases that have ranged from the accused posting something on Facebook deemed offensive to Islam to simply being tagged in such a post. Such accusations are automatically accompanied by attacks by the local mob on, not only the accused's house, but all surrounding Christian homes. Subsequent trials have been a mockery of justice with courts in some cases surrounded by an angry mob and the accused denied legal representation.

Under President Sisi, blasphemy accusations and trials have continued. On January 10, Karim Ashraf El Banna was sentenced for three years in prison. The Appeals Court has subsequently upheld his conviction. On February 16, Sherif Gaber received a one year sentence for creating an atheist Facebook page. On April 28, Michael Mounir Bishay was sentenced to one year in prison for sharing a video, which had aired on an Egyptian TV channel on Facebook. On May 12, Shia Mahmoud Dahroug received a six months sentence for possessing Shia books at his home. Lastly on April 8th, a Coptic teacher and five Coptic students were arrested for filming a video making fun of ISIS. No verdict has been issued yet in their case.

The above mentioned attacks and blasphemy cases are hardly the first and will unfortunately not be the last unless the Egyptian regime begins to seriously address the root causes of Egypt's endemic sectarian crisis. Failure by the Sisi regime to uphold the rule of law and protect the country's Christians from attack bodes ill for the Middle East's largest Christian community. While the Egyptian regime believes that its resort to reconciliation sessions instead of punishing the attackers helps in restoring and maintaining order, the reality is the exact opposite. The lack of punishment has created a culture of impunity, which in turn has become a culture of encouragement. Fanatics have rightly concluded that attacking Copts, not only will go unpunished, but more importantly will result in the mob's demands being met. The Egyptian regime needs to offer better protection of its most vulnerable citizens preventing the attacks from taking place, and enforce the rule of law by bringing attackers to justice. The Egyptian regime needs to understand that protecting religious minorities is not a luxurious act to be done after serious security threats are dealt with or that punishing those attacking them can wait until stability and security is restored. Those attacking Copts share the same hatreds that fuels the terrorists and no stability or security can be achieved if criminals are not punished. Likewise, blasphemy accusations should not be used as a means to terrorize religious minorities.

President Sisi has undertaken some symbolic gestures towards Copts such as visiting the Coptic Cathedral on Christmas Eve and has developed a good relationship with Pope Tawadros II. Symbolic gestures need to be followed by meaningful steps. Despite repeated promises, the Egyptian regime has failed to pass a new law governing the building of houses of worship, which would streamline the process of building churches. Despite proclamations that all of Egypt's citizens are equal, Copts continue to suffer from discrimination in government appointments. Unofficial caps on Coptic representation in key state institutions such as the military and police force continue with several of them such as the intelligence service and the state security not having a single Copt within their ranks. President Sisi needs to change these discriminatory practices and develop a civil service based on merit and not one based on one's faith.

In his speech to scholars of Al Azhar, President Sisi underscored the need for religious reform. The fight against terrorism can no longer be limited to security means, but must be accompanied by a policy tool kit that addresses the root causes of radicalization and terrorism. He has stressed the need to change a religious discourse that has fueled hatred. While President Sisi's call came as a welcome step, the Egyptian regime needs to prove its seriousness by beginning the process of reform. Instead of doing so, the Egyptian state has flipped the call on its head with the Ministry of Religious Endowments forming groups to spread awareness of the threats posed by atheists, Shia and Baha'is.

A good place to start would be Egypt's educational system. Despite numerous attempts at reform, some of which were funded by USAID, Egypt's current educational system is an incubator for extremism and radicalization. Attempting to address the question of intolerance, radicalization, and extremism in the Egyptian educational system must begin by addressing the very structure of that system and not merely changing curricula as previous efforts have attempted. With 24.3% of non-technical high school students in Egypt, Al Azhar managed schools, whose curriculum teaches intolerance of non-Muslims and helps radicalize students, should be brought under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Students should not continue being taught that the rules of Dhimmitude are to be upheld, that Christians should pay

Jizya, or that building new churches in the land of Islam is not permissible. Reforming the curriculum should not be based on haphazardly adding a few sections on tolerance and citizenship values to the textbooks, but instead should adopt a cross-disciplinary approach that stresses values of equality, peace, and respect for other views throughout the curriculum. Egyptian schools should no longer produce students who know nothing about the world around them, a void that is only filled by Islamists with falsehoods and conspiracy theories. Students should be taught world history, the history of ideas and world religions and cultures in order for them to understand and respect the richness of diversity, and Egyptian history textbooks should include the important contributions that Christians, Jews and women have made to Egyptian society. On top of all those efforts, attention must be given to educating the teachers themselves given the instrumental role they play in how the curriculum is taught and understood. The Ministry of Education should reverse its policy of transferring extremist teachers to far away governorates in the country's south, making these governorates the perfect recruiting ground for extremists, and ensure that no extremist teacher is allowed in the classroom.

Only by addressing the roots causes of the plight of religious minorities, only by confronting extremism head on by eradicating it from the classrooms, only by upholding the rule of law and treating all of Egypt's citizens as equals without discrimination, and only by preventing the mob attacks on Copts, can Egypt be put on a path towards stability and prosperity. Egypt must undertake these steps and many others, but it will also need the help of its international friends on top of which is the United States.

On the 11th of January 1974, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger arrived in the Egyptian city of Aswan to begin his shuttle diplomacy between Arab capitals and Jerusalem. While the immediate goal of Dr. Kissinger's diplomatic efforts was ensuring agreement on proposals for disengagement following the 1973 war, the former Secretary soon discovered a willing partner in Egypt's President Anwar El Sadat. In the following years, key American Cold war strategic interests were achieved as President Sadat agreed, in return for the complete return of the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty not only to seek a lasting peace between his country and Israel, but also to detach Egypt from the Soviet orbit and put it formally in the U.S. camp. In return for U.S. financial, military and developmental assistance, Egypt would become a U.S. ally and successive U.S. administrations hoped that the country would lead the region away from the path of destruction and war introducing a new era of peace and cooperation.

For some thirty years, the formula worked. Despite continued U.S. Egyptian disagreements over a variety of issues ranging from the peace process, U.S. policies in the region, democracy, and human rights, Egypt and the United States developed a close partnership to face a variety of security challenges from Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, to terrorism. Most importantly, the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, despite remaining cold, has held.

The Egypt of today is however not the one that Dr. Kissinger has visited in 1974 and with which he built a lasting partnership. Instead of being a regional player leading the region to peace, Egypt has now become a playing field where a variety of international, regional and local forces compete in an all-out war to shape the country's future trajectory. Egypt is no longer a contestant but instead is itself contested. Despite these changes, U.S. policy has not followed suit in

addressing the changing conditions. The United States continues to base its policies on an Egypt that no longer exists.

This has to change. As Egypt continues to face severe challenges on various security, economic, and political fronts, the United States needs to adjust its policies towards the country to face those challenges. Instead of hoping for an Egypt that would lead the Middle East to peace, the United States needs to work for an Egypt that does not descend into the regional chaos that has overwhelmed so many Arab countries. U.S. interests in Egypt should no longer be limited to maintaining the peace treaty, securing free passage through the Suez Canal and flights for U.S. military aircrafts in its skies. Instead they should be adjusted to help Egypt face its enduring challenges and overcome them. No one wants a Somalia on the Nile, a Libya on Israel's borders, or a Syria in control of the Suez Canal, the United States least of all.

Thank you again for holding and chairing this hearing and I look forwards to your questions.