

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

1540 Kuser Road, Suite A9
Hamilton, NJ 08619-3828
(609) 585-7878
TTY (609) 585-3650

108 Lacey Road, Suite 38A
Whiting, NJ 08759-1331
(732) 350-2300

2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3004
(202) 225-3765

<http://chrissmith.house.gov>



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“Human Rights Abuses in Egypt”

*Human Rights Abuse in Egypt
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and Int’l Organizations
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
December 10, 2013*

Good morning. Today’s hearing examines the escalating human rights abuses in Egypt. It is fitting that we are holding this hearing today, on International Human Rights Day, because we are witnessing grievous violence and other abuses directed against religious and political minorities, particularly the Copts and other Christians, about which our government and the media has said far too little—which seems to be a pattern world-wide.

(The persecution of Christians is escalating. Witness the slaughter of Christians in the Central African Republic (CAR). Bishop Nongo of the CAR told my committee that Christians were being targeted because of their faith while the U.N., the United States, and the rest of the world looked on. On Thursday, I will be chairing a hearing on American pastor Saeed Abedini who is jailed and suffering torture in Iran. Pastor Abedini’s wife, Naghmeh, will tell my committee on Thursday that:

“While I am thankful for President Obama’s willingness to express concern about my husband and the other imprisoned Americans in Iran during his recent phone conversation with Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, I was devastated to learn that the Administration didn’t even ask for my husband’s release when directly seated across the table from the leaders of the government that holds him captive.

My husband is suffering because he is a Christian. He is suffering because he is an American. Yet, his own government at least the Executive and diplomatic representatives has abandoned him. Don’t we owe it to him as a nation to stand up for his human rights, for his freedom?”)

After President Mubarak resigned in February of 2011, the world hoped for a new Egypt, a just government for all Egyptians, which would not make President Mubarak’s mistakes—but reality has been just the opposite.

Horrific anti-Christian pogroms have taken place under each of the post-Mubarak governments. For some of these abuses, the governments bear the responsibility of inaction. For others they bear direct

responsibility. In recent months, undercurrents of abuse and contempt for human dignity long existing in Egypt have turned into flash floods of violence.

For example, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces presided over the Maspero protest massacre in October 2011. At least twenty-five people were killed and more than 300 injured—almost all of them Copts—when the military drove trucks through the crowd and used live ammunition against the unarmed protestors.

Under the now-displaced Morsi government three low-level soldiers involved were charged with minor crimes and received two- to three-year sentences. No commanding officers were held responsible for ordering or failing to prevent the deadly assaults.

While Mr. Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, at times voiced support for an Egypt that was home to Muslims and Christians, his inaction belied his rhetoric. In April of 2012, St. Mark's Cathedral, seat of the Coptic Pope, was attacked by 30-40 Muslim youths. While dozens of Copts were sheltering inside, security forces joined the mob. Rather than dispersing the crowd, they participated in the all-night attack or stood idly by as rocks, gasoline bombs, and gas canisters were lobbed into the iconic cathedral. Despite this, President Morsi denied that the clash was sectarian in nature.

After Mr. Morsi was removed in July of this year, the military ended the Muslim Brotherhood's sit-in with violence, killing hundreds of protestors. Tragically, some in the Muslim Brotherhood scapegoated the Copts although the Copts had nothing to do with the military's violent response.

On August 14, a day that will be remembered as the worst day for Copts in 700 years, thirty-seven churches, five schools, three Bible societies, four other Christian institutions, and many homes and businesses were burned or damaged by mobs. More than 100 deaths were documented in the initial spate of violence and its aftermath.

Some Copts have charged the current military government in Egypt with allowing the attacks on Coptic persons, businesses, churches, and homes to continue—often in sight of police stations and in spite of repeated and direct calls for help—in order to solidify government power as the only alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as to justify their own heavy-handed crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood denies any involvement in the attacks occurring across the country, and has at times condemned them.

Yet the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party Branch in Helwan reportedly posted a statement holding the Coptic Pope responsible for Morsi's removal and otherwise linked Copts to attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood also called for Friday prayers to be held in an evangelical church in Minya after it was occupied and converted into a mosque on August 15.

Whoever the attackers are—and that is one thing we hope to learn more about today—the bottom line is that Coptic citizens are having their most basic human rights – freedom of religion, freedom of association, and equal protection of the laws – denied.

We can never rest while human dignity is so grossly trampled on – nor can we ever accept the suffering that has marked Coptic life for decades, very much including the abductions, forced conversions, and forced marriage of Coptic girls and women. These abuses have continued unabated, and, by some reports, have escalated sharply following the Arab Spring, as have the abuse of the Egyptian courts to prosecute blasphemy cases against Christians, moderate Muslims and secularists.

Moreover, despite the nearly 1.5 billion dollars in foreign aid American taxpayers give Egypt each year, neither the Mubarak government nor the Morsi government, or now the military government, has seen fit to return kidnapped American citizen children Noor and Ramsey Bower, who were abducted by their mother to Egypt in 2009 in violation of valid U.S. court orders, to the United States. They, along with about 30 other American children in Egypt, are forced to live without the love and guidance of an American parent who daily fights for their return, while being stripped of half of their culture and half of their identity.

In addition, freedom of expression continues to be under fire. The current interim government has been arresting and jailing journalists critical of the military government, jamming the broadcast signals, deporting foreign reporters, and otherwise closing the offices of news outlets that are “broadcasting lies.”

In his September 23rd speech to the United Nations General Assembly, the President stated that his “...approach to Egypt reflects a larger point: the United States will at times work with governments that do not meet the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests.” These core interests were earlier defined in the speech to include the “Camp David Accords and counter-terrorism” efforts but not, I believe mistakenly, to include human rights.

Human rights, and the intrinsic dignity of every human being from womb to the tomb, are important in and of themselves. But for those who fail to grasp this, there is another important point to be made: it is in the strategic interest of the United States to encourage governments to respect the rights of their people, because governments that fail to do so are in the final analysis unstable: this should be the abiding lesson of the Arab Spring.

The president also stated that future U.S. support to Egypt “will depend upon Egypt’s progress in pursuing a democratic path.” Again, it is unclear what criteria this entails. What if the democratic path does not include protection of human rights, such as what we saw under the Morsi government and now the interim government?

It is not democracy per se that is to be the goal, but rather a duly-elected constitutional government that respects minorities, the separation of power, and human rights. Tyranny of the majority is not an acceptable option.

What is clear is that the U.S. needs a new approach. This Administration’s short-sighted approach of not clearly linking aid to the protection of human rights in Egypt has been unequivocally ineffective. It is my hope that our hearing today will shed light on what went wrong and how the United States can be more effective in protecting human rights going forward.