

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Questions

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RESPONSE

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The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* has expressed concern about the behavior of Egypt's police force in dealing with Christians, noting that, "[a]ccording to some observers, police responses to some incidents of sectarian violence were slow". The report lists a number of the incidents of concern in which members of Egypt's Coptic Christian community have been allegedly subject to discriminatory mistreatment by Egyptian police in recent years. Copts associated with Muslims who have converted to Christianity are said to be particularly at risk. Examples follow:

On May 31, 2008, police located within 1 mile of the Abu Fana Monastery in Upper Egypt reportedly took 3 hours to respond to a request for help when a monk's cell at the monastery was under attack. The armed assault resulted in the death of one Muslim Bedouin villager, multiple injuries, including gunshot wounds, to monks, the kidnapping and abuse of several monks, and looting and damages estimated at more than 1,000,000 Egyptian pounds. Three monks abducted from the monastery were reportedly rescued by security services (see Societal Abuses and Discrimination).

...On July 15, 2007, a female convert from Islam to Christianity, Shaimaa Muhammad al-Sayed, was rescued by police while being beaten in public by attackers and arrested following police verification that she was the daughter of one of the attackers who claimed that she was a convert to Christianity and that he had previously filed a missing persons report on her. She was found to be in possession of a falsified identity card listing her religion as Christianity and reportedly held on charges of falsifying a government document. The Office of Prosecutor General, Supreme State Security Prosecution, in Cairo ordered her release on July 22, 2007, and confiscated both her original identity card and the counterfeit one. According to credible reports, after her release, her father beat her in front of the police station.

...On August 8, 2007, police detained Adel Fawzi Faltas Hanna, a retired doctor and president of the Middle East Christian Association's (MECA) Egyptian branch, and Peter Ezzat Hanna, a photographer for MECA and the Copts United Web site. The authorities investigated the two men's activities, on charges including allegedly denigrating Islam and disturbing the public order. On July 7, 2007, Nader Fawzi, in his capacity as president of MECA, had filed a lawsuit naming President Mubarak and five senior ministers as defendants, accusing the Government of failing to properly investigate the al-Kosheh incident of January 1-3, 2000, in which 21 Copts were killed, others wounded, and Copt properties destroyed, and concerning which the perpetrators were not brought to justice and no indemnity to the victims or their families was paid. Also, near the time of the arrests, the MECA had publicly indicated its support of Muhammad Higazy, who had announced that he was suing the Government for the right to have his conversion to Christianity indicated on his civil documents.

The police also raided the Cairo homes of Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat and reportedly confiscated several copies of a MECA publication, *The Persecuted: The Story of the Coptic Nation*. On November 4, authorities released Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat following 3 months in detention. On November 5, authorities arrested three other MECA affiliates, whom authorities also investigated for a variety of charges, including denigrating Islam. On December 26, 2007, authorities released the three men without charges.

...While there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity.

In April 2005 State Security authorities detained Bahaa Al-Accad, a citizen who was born Muslim but who reportedly converted to Christianity. Accad was initially held at Tora Prison, south of Cairo. After a court ordered Accad's release from detention in August 2006, State Security authorities deliberately ignored the ruling, eventually transferring him to Wadi el-Natroun Prison, located 60 miles north of Cairo along the highway to Alexandria. On April 28, 2007, the authorities released Accad after he had spent almost 2 years in prison without being formally charged with any crime.

The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity.

...On November 22, 2007, police detained Siham Ibrahim Muhammad Hassan al-Sharqawi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, on the outskirts of Qena, 300 miles south of Cairo, who had been in hiding since 2003. She was interrogated for 4 days and released.

In August 2007 authorities investigated seven Copt employees of the MOI in fraud and bribery cases in connection with re-converts to Christianity. The investigation was reportedly ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

...On December 12, 2007, Esna police placed two Copts in detention after they were attacked by a group of Muslim men, reportedly because they were thought to have been involved with

a Muslim woman. The two men, Bishoi Ishaq and Michael Milad, were placed in custody for “security reasons” and released after 15 days in detention (US Department of State 2008, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, 19 September – Attachment 3).

A September 2004 article in *Egypt Today* notes the manner in which Coptic Christian communities in Upper Egypt are dependent upon the larger, Muslim dominated, tribal networks to which they belong for security. The report also provides comment on the strained communal relations between Muslim and Coptic Christian communities in Upper Egypt’s various locales.

The social foundation of Upper Egypt is not built on the individual, but on the individual as part of a group.

“The clan or tribe or village is the basic social unit. The individual is always bound in his relations with others. It is his basic defense,” explains Daa Rashwan, head of the Institute for Comparative Politics at the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies.

“There is an ancient pattern in most of the villages in southern Upper Egypt, which is organized according to a form of tribalism,” concurs Saad. “So you would find each tribe living in a quarter, including the Christians. Usually the Christians in the village would be under the protection of a large tribe. So any assault or affront or aggression against any Christian member would directly mean that it is an assault on that tribe. It is a kind of safety mechanism in a way.”

A greater importance is placed on ancestry, kinship ties and tribal lineage in Upper Egypt. Strong, too, are the sense of honor and the concept of the blood-feud or vendetta. This has led to outbreaks of group violence, including revenge killings. A feud is another form of political rivalry.

“The practice of the vendetta in Upper Egypt has positive, not negative, implications because it averts aggression by offering a means of collective security [from] any group that trespasses against another group, whether rich or poor, because it knows well that aggression will be met with violent retaliation,” Rashwan maintains.

Not all disputes break out in violence, though. Customary law has strong roots in Upper Egypt and reconciliation councils are highly formalized. Many of the disputes are settled within these unofficial councils.

By comparison, Rashwan points out, there are fewer incidents of violence in Upper Egypt than in Cairo. “The violence in Upper Egypt is predictable. You won’t find random acts of violence as witnessed in the slums of Cairo or elsewhere.”

“Upper Egyptians do not see the issue of vendetta as a problem,” adds Choukry Fouad, a retired diplomat who was born in Assiut in 1932 and served as Egypt’s ambassador to Yugoslavia. “They think this is something natural. Cairo newspapers write about it with shock and amazement, as if it were something strange and uncivilized. In Upper Egypt, it is not considered something negative. On the contrary, it is considered something positive. They see it as a tradition that needs to be respected.”

...The greatest concentration of Christians in Upper Egypt is in the governorate of Assiut, followed by Minya, Sohag and Qena. In years past, flare-ups of sectarian strife in Upper Egypt have made headlines locally and internationally.

“My own feeling is that where there are bad issues in Muslim-Christian relations, there are other problems in that area, too,” says Hopkins. “It all kind of works together to produce

something unpleasant: social tension between rich and poor, land pressure, fights between clans, feuds of one kind or another. It kind of spills over into Muslim-Christian relations rather than emanating from them.”

In a sense, Hopkins says, Upper Egyptians are more conscious of their faiths and the differences between them than their peers elsewhere in the nation.

“They were very aware that they had to pay particular attention not to have a fight that would break along those lines,” he says. “If there was a dispute between a Muslim and a Christian all kinds of people got involved in the dispute. If it was two Muslims, they would probably settle it much more quietly.”

Often, Upper Egyptians see the expansion of one religion as threatening and cause for tension.

“Usually it has to do with church building, or trying to mend a wall, or has something to do with construction and building anything that is perceived as Christians expanding their public space,” says Saad.

The state has imposed sharp limits on the building of churches, and permits are hard to come by.

Rashwan argues that Christian-Muslim relations in Upper Egypt are not particularly different from elsewhere in Egypt. “There has been violence between Muslims and Christians greater than that witnessed in Kosheh [in 2000], such as what happened in Beit Allam, for example,” says Rashwan, referring to the infamous blood-feud that killed 22 members of one family in the governorate of Sohag in 2002 (Hassam, A.F. 2004, ‘The Saeedis Awake’, *Egypt Today*, September <http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=2433> – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 6).

Christian advocacy websites frequently report incidents in which it is alleged that members of Egypt’s Coptic Christian communities have been subject to discriminatory mistreatment by police. Examples follow, including examples of incidents alleged to have taken place in Upper Egypt:

- On 3 August 2009 the US Copts website carried a report which claimed that police in Upper Egypt had failed to adequately respond to an “eruption of sectarian violence in Egypt’s Minya province continued last week as local Christians again faced harsh reprisals from Muslims for trying to convert a building into a worship facility”. According to this report: “officers investigating complaints from Muslim villagers about two crosses Shehata had installed on the outside of the building took him to the local police station. After questioning, they released him with orders to return the next morning. At that time two policemen escorted him to the main prison in Minya, where he was held without charge until Saturday afternoon” (Elliott, R. 2009, ‘Violence Again Erupts in Upper Egypt over Quest for Worship Site’, US Copts website, 3 August <http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2009/08/03/violence-again-erupts-in-upper-egypt-over-quest-for-worship-site/> – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 7).
- On 18 July 2009 the US Copts website carried a report by the *Assyrian International News Agency* which related claims that police in Upper Egypt had facilitated the abduction of two Coptic Christian women who were being forced to convert to Islam (‘Egyptian Security Refuses to Return Abducted Christian Coptic Girl’ 2009, US

Copts website, source: *AINA*, 18 July

<http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2009/07/18/egyptian-security-refuses-to-return-abducted-christian-coptic-girl/> – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 8).

- On 30 January 2009 the US Copts website carried a *Compass Direct* report which claimed that Egyptian police had stage “a brutal raid on six Christian brothers and their café because they had opened for business during Ramadan”. The report alleges that: “13 police officers raided the café in Port Sa’id, a city in Egypt’s Nile delta, overturning tables, breaking chairs and smashing glasses” and beating “the brothers with sticks, leaving two with broken arms and a third needing 11 stitches for a head wound” (‘Egypt: Christians Sent To Prison After Brutal Police Raid’ 2009, US Copts website, source: *Compass Direct*, 30 January <http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2009/01/30/egypt-christians-sent-to-prison-after-brutal-police-raid/> – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 9).
- On 3 December 2008 the US Copts website carried a reported on claims that “Two Coptic Christians wrongfully arrested for killing a Muslim during the May 31 attack on Abu Fana monastery in Egypt have been tortured and sent to a detention camp so authorities could try to extract a false confession”. The lawyer of the detained men has reportedly argued that: “Security forces are detaining the brothers to blackmail the Coptic Church into testifying that the attack against Abu Fana monastery in Mallawi, Upper Egypt, was not religiously motivated” (‘Egypt: Two Copts Wrongly Detained, Tortured’ 2008, US Copts website, 3 December <http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2008/12/03/egypt-two-copts-wrongly-detained-tortured/> – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 10).
- On 22 February 2007 the United Copts website carried a *Compass Direct* report which claimed that: “Police detained Christian families in Upper Egypt and forced them to deny arson attacks on their homes during a spate of anti-Christian violence” (‘Egypt Detains Copts after Anti-Christian Attack’ 2007, United Copts website, source: *Compass Direct*, 22 February http://www.unitedcopts.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=828&Itemid=83 – Accessed 18 August 2009– Attachment 11).

Please note: in recent years Cornelis Hulsman, the Dutch editor-in-chief of the Cairo-based Arab-West Report, has undertaken an extensive study of the situation in Egypt in terms of the kinds of claims which appear on websites like US Copt, finding that these claims are often an exaggerated or inaccurate representation of events. Extracts follow from a 2004 interview:

“It’s a matter of mixing facts with belief,” says Cornelis Hulsman, a sociologist and director of the Arab West Report – a press report dedicated to covering religious and Arab-West issues in the Egyptian press. “Many of those stories don’t hold – which doesn’t mean that all the stories don’t hold. You are in the sphere of urban legends, of rumors. Foreigners and journalists have to be extremely careful about what they hear.”

Hulsman, who is Christian, suggests that some Copts exaggerate their “underdog” status, especially when talking to outsiders. He says that discrimination does take place, but that “it goes both ways. (It’s often a matter of) giving priority to your own friends. But Muslims happen to be the overwhelming majority, so Christians feel this more. This whole society is based on relations. If you as a Christian have good relations with Muslims, you can often avoid problems; you find your way through. It’s a matter of relation-building” (Lindsey, U. 2004, ‘Coptic church construction heightens tension in Egypt’, *Daily Star*, 24 May –

Attachment 5; see also: Dabu, C. 2005, 'Christians living in Egypt as a minority', The Social Edge.com, March <http://www.thesocialedge.com/archives/other/3articles-mar2005.htm> – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 4).

In January 2007 the Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada received advice on the situation of Egypt's Coptic Christian communities from "a Senior Fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom". According to this source, Egypt's Coptic Christian communities are subject to: "abusive and discriminatory practices of local police and security forces".

The Copts, while usually having some freedom of worship, are threatened in varying degrees by terrorism from extreme Islamic groups, by the abusive and discriminatory practices of local police and security forces, by the frequent refusal of security officials to defend them or to prosecute those who have attacked them, and by systematically discriminatory and restrictive Egyptian Government policies.

...At the local level, police may ignore, acquiesce, be complicit with, support, or even be members of radical groups. (Mohammed Atef, who many reports say was the military chief of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, was formerly an Egyptian policeman). Consequently the police may attack Christians themselves, or provide cover for those who do. In other cases the police may be intimidated into inaction by radicals, who may outnumber and outgun them. In other cases the police may simply be incompetent. Consequently Copts who are attacked often receive little help, and sometimes further repression, from police (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2007, *EGY102385.E – Egypt: Treatment of Christians, including Coptic Christians, and availability of state protection (March 2004 – January 2007)*, 26 February 2007 http://www2.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=450925 – Accessed 18 August 2009 – Attachment 1).

A March 2004 provides information on an incident in which members of the Coptic Christian community in the Upper Egypt area of El Kosheh were allegedly subjected to arrest and torture in the custody of police, in the conduct of an investigation into a murder case suspected of being an episode of tribal violence. The extract follows:

A blood feud can become exacerbated if Muslims and Copts are involved, going from a simple family vendetta to a religious conflict (The Estimate 11 Feb. 2000). Since police officers are enlisted from the local area that they serve, confessional animosities between Muslims and Christians can influence police behaviour (ibid.).

In 1998, two Copts were murdered in the town of El Kosheh (ibid.). While the Christian community believed that the killer was a Muslim seeking to avenge the death of his own brother, local authorities decided that the unknown killer was a Christian (ibid.), perhaps to avoid a large-scale religious conflict (Cairo Times 1 Oct. 1998). Policemen proceeded to round up between 500 (according to the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights or EOHR) and 1,200 Copts (according to Coptic Bishop Wissa) for questioning (ibid.). Once in police custody, at a police station or in the mountains, villagers allege that these Copts were subjected to "various forms of torture" (ibid.). A correspondent interviewed 54 people who claimed that they had been victims of torture, and most bore physical scars (ibid.). According to interviewees, policemen threatened the detained women with rape, extorted money from inmates, and tortured several people to the point where many had to be hospitalized (ibid.). All those who were tortured (but not all those who were detained) were apparently Copts, and according to priests all the policemen were Muslim (ibid.). As a result, many Copts believed that they were being discriminated against for their religious affiliation (The Estimate 11 Feb. 2000) (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *EGY42420.E – Egypt: Al-Tar*

vendetta feuds; underlying philosophy and principles; areas or groups that participate in it; how Egyptian law addresses it; reaction of authorities to violence committed in this tradition, 2 March – Attachment 2).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine <http://www.google.com>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2007, *EGY102385.E – Egypt: Treatment of Christians, including Coptic Christians, and availability of state protection (March 2004 – January 2007)*, 26 February 2007 http://www2.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=450925 – Accessed 18 August 2009.
2. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *EGY42420.E – Egypt: Al-Tar vendetta feuds; underlying philosophy and principles; areas or groups that participate in it; how Egyptian law addresses it; reaction of authorities to violence committed in this tradition, 2 March*. (REFINFO)
3. US Department of State 2008, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, 19 September.
4. Dabu, Christl 2005, ‘Christians living in Egypt as a minority’, The Social Edge.com, March <http://www.thesocialedge.com/archives/other/3articles-mar2005.htm> – Accessed 19 March 2007.
5. Lindsey, U. 2004, ‘Coptic church construction heightens tension in Egypt’, *Daily Star*, 24 May.
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7. Elliott, R. 2009, ‘Violence Again Erupts in Upper Egypt over Quest for Worship Site’, US Copts website, 3 August <http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2009/08/03/violence-again-erupts-in-upper-egypt-over-quest-for-worship-site/> – Accessed 18 August 2009.
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<http://www.copts.com/english1/index.php/2009/01/30/egypt-christians-sent-to-prison-after-brutal-police-raid/> – Accessed 18 August 2009.
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http://www.unitedcopts.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=828&Itemid=83 – Accessed 18 August 2009.