

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM R O U N D T A B L E

October 1, 2018

Dear Chairmen Royce and Ros-Lehtinen,

As an unofficial group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners, we write to ask that you urgently mark-up **H. RES. 673, Expressing concern over attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt**, and bring it to a full floor vote.

This resolution, which Rep. Ros-Lehtinen supported as an original cosponsor, now has the strong bi-partisan backing of 47 Members of Congress, many of whom are members of the MENA subcommittee. During the Foreign Affairs Hearing, **Egypt: Security, Human Rights, and Reform**, which Rep. Ros – Lehtinen chaired on July 24, the expert witnesses presented compelling evidence of the decimation of civil society and increased persecution of religious minorities in Egypt, particularly the Copts.

Since his election, president el-Sisi has pursued increasingly authoritarian measures to consolidate his power, silencing all political dissent, controlling the media, imprisoning human rights activists while failing to protect religious minorities from attacks by internal fanatic Islamists, much less end the persecution. Copts have been subjected to more attacks during el-Sisi's rule than during Mubark's or the Muslim Brothers'. Copts are under attack in numerous ways; from the institutional and daily systematic discrimination to the intermittent terrorization such as church bombings that cause large casualties. This entrenched system of persecution is no less heinous in breaking Copts down into a state of submission and hopelessness.

The Egyptian government denies the ongoing persecution of the Copts and blames it on international terrorism, rather than acknowledging the reality that the persecution is perpetrated by internal fanatic Islamist groups, the government, its security and intelligence agencies and the society at large, which has been thoroughly radicalized. The Egyptian government has succeeded in conflating attacks on the Copts, which are perpetrated internally with external threat of international terrorism. It has opted to turn a blind eye to attacks on the Copts by fanatic Islamists and the radicalized section of the society, which threatens the rule of law and Egypt's internal stability, and succeeded in externalizing the threat to gain Western support. As part of its denial and deception, the Egyptian government has also succeeded in co-opting the Coptic church, whose leaders under intense pressure have issued statements denying the ongoing persecution of the Copts contrary to reality, and thus, deprived the church of providing moral support to its persecuted flock. The Egyptian government has abused combating terrorism to rationalize its severe measures suspending human rights and decimating civil society.

It would seem that the Egyptian government has succeeded in convincing US politicians that the fight against terrorism supersedes human rights and religious freedom. But US policy makers should not fall for such deception. Coptic Solidarity forewarned against such a pitfall that, "combating terrorism should not be achieved at the cost of human rights". The Egyptian government understands the significance of H. RES 673 and has exerted tremendous pressure on

US legislators to compromise it either by gutting it of its content; by denying the persecution or blaming it on external terrorism or by completely halting its passage. If US legislators bow to Egypt's pressure, they stand to risk; reinforcing Egypt's denial of the ongoing persecution of the Copts, other minorities and continued decimation of civil society; emboldening the Egyptian government and persecution of all religious minorities, and suppression of civil society and the media are likely to worsen; providing precedence that may compromise future efforts to urge Egypt to make reforms; and confirming the Egyptian media's false accusations that US legislators do not care about human rights or religious freedom but are using them to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs.

The US is now engaging Egypt in the fight against Islamist terrorism and stands to exercise its weight and moral values to promote equality, civil society, and religious freedom for all Egyptians. Egypt's stability is vital, but Copts and civil society should not be the victims – or collateral damage – that pay the ultimate price in the war on terrorism. The war on terrorism needs to be fought less in military battles and more within Egypt against a radicalized fanatic culture and the institutions, such as al-Azhar, which promote a totalitarian hate ideology of Salafi Islamists that foster intolerance, terrorism and a vigilante mindset that subverts the rule of law, with the acquiescence of security forces, and threatens Egypt's internal stability.

The recent Ministerial in support of international religious freedom has affirmed that international religious freedom has become an integral part of the US foreign policy. It is imperative to pass H. Res. 673 since it will send Egypt a message that this is not mere empty rhetoric. In this increasingly authoritarian environment in which minorities suffer, passing H. RES. 673 before the end of this session of Congress will send an important message to the Egyptian government that the Congress cares about the state of human rights and religious freedom in Egypt, and is willing to address it.

We look forward to your thoughtful consideration of this request and to your reply.

Respectfully,

Coptic Solidarity

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