



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Coptic Solidarity’s “The Indigenous Copts: Marginalized and Excluded in  
their Homeland”**

Thursday, October 20, 2022 at 12:00 PM

224 2nd St SE, Washington, DC 20003

**Remarks for Commissioner Mohamed Magid**

Good afternoon, and thank you very much for the opportunity to join you today representing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or “USCIRF.” USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal body that advises the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress on religious freedom conditions around the world and on U.S. policy measures to bring improvements. Today I’m honored to join Coptic Solidarity, the wider human rights and religious freedom advocacy community, and other members of the U.S. government in commemorating the lives of Copts lost in recent years to religious persecution and in discussing religious freedom conditions in Egypt. As both a USCIRF commissioner and a member of clergy within the Muslim community of Northern Virginia, I am keenly aware of the vital importance of freedom of religion or belief for all people—regardless of how diverse our beliefs may be—and of the role of the United States and other members of the international community in encouraging religious freedom around the world. On a personal note: given my own background as a Sudanese-American, I am attentive to religious freedom

issues affecting the whole northeastern African region, including Egypt and its large Coptic population.

USCIRF continues to monitor and report on the discrimination and abuses long endured by the Copts, Egypt's indigenous Christian community. We recognize the historical import of the ancient Coptic martyrs—celebrated across numerous Christian churches and denominations around the world—and we acknowledge the Coptic martyrs of recent years, as well. Twenty-seven of those modern-day martyrs died at the hands of Egypt's military forces on October 9, 2011—the date we commemorate every October as “the Maspero Massacre.” Those Copts, among other protestors, had gathered at Cairo's Maspero media building to draw attention to a recent example in Aswan of a longstanding violation of religious freedom: the targeted destruction of churches by anti-Christian mobs, and the Egyptian government's frequent failure to bring to justice the perpetrators of these and other anti-Coptic crimes.

The protest was a peaceful one, yet Egyptian military personnel responded violently, firing live ammunition on the unarmed protestors, releasing tear gas, and using heavy armored vehicles to run over and kill people. Perhaps equally troubling is the reaction of the Egyptian media outlets, which incited Egyptian citizens nearby to aid the state forces in violently subduing the protestors, most of whom were Copts.

In the years since the massacre, successive Egyptian governments' responses have been, at best, inadequate, with national fact-finding committees avoiding full attribution of the military's actions and blaming “infiltrators” for the violence, and with judicial investigations resulting in three junior military members' trials for “unintentional killing.” Over the years, USCIRF has reported on the “culture of impunity” insulating the government actors who led the onslaught against the

peaceful protestors. Indeed, although in past years the government opened investigations against some senior military figures, the inquiries yielded no public consequences. In 2021, the Washington, D.C.-based Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy concluded that “no high-ranking government, military, or police officials have ever been held accountable for the Maspero Massacre.”

The Maspero Massacre took place eleven years ago, yet, despite the passage of time and the changing of government administrations, Egypt’s Copts of all denominations face continued systemic discrimination, the threat of violent hate crimes from their neighbors, and the fear of potential arrest and detention by state security forces for speaking out about discrimination against Copts. In a country with over 60,000 prisoners of conscience—even following the government’s release this year of hundreds of such detainees—outspoken Copts and the human rights advocates and journalists who report on their status risk detention, unjust trials, and travel bans. Some releases this year of Coptic activists and researchers include those of Ramy Kamel, who spent more than two years in pre-trial detention after attempting to participate in a United Nations Forum on Minority Issues, and Patrick Zaki, whose trial for publishing an online opinion article detailing Copts’ experience of discrimination remains on the docket, with the most recent adjournment until November of this year.

Although the number of large mob attacks has diminished during the past couple of years, the government continues to closely regulate Copts’ construction and renovation of their churches which, especially in small villages in Upper Egypt, serve as a point of social contention that can fuel anti-Coptic sentiment. For example, in Luxor this past June, the government’s approval at long last of the Archangel Michael congregation’s application for a church license prompted some Islamist residents of the village and beyond to riot and set fire to Copts’ personal

property. Additionally, assailants have violently attacked individual Copts for their Coptic identity or Christian belief—what most might think of as a “hate crime.” Although occasionally a high-profile case will lead to a prosecution and sentence for the murderer—as in the fatal stabbing in April of a Coptic Orthodox priest, Archbishop Arsanious Wadid as he walked along the seashore in Alexandria—the Egyptian government frequently downplays the socially-engrained nature of anti-Coptic violence, often hastily ascribing “mental illness” to the attackers.

As an independent body, USCIRF is uniquely equipped to assess religious freedom violations abroad—and potential progress—and to make recommendations to the U.S. Congress and administration that we believe will help advance religious freedom in countries including Egypt. In recent years, the Egyptian government has offered some highly visible endorsements of “religious tolerance”—a concept distinct from, but potentially related to, religious freedom. For example, President El-Sisi regularly attends Coptic Orthodox Christmas liturgies, and this year he appointed the first-ever Christian judge to the Supreme Constitutional Court. The government continues to undertake the restoration of ancient Jewish and Christian sites and houses of worship, and last year’s inaugural National Human Rights Strategy made several references to increasing religious tolerance among youth and removing sectarian language from school curricula.

However, those measures do not sufficiently alleviate the threats faced by Copts and other religious minorities and their advocates. Many impediments to religious freedom remain enshrined both in Egyptian legislation and the judicial system, and in old but persistent social hierarchies that disfavor religious minorities and, in some contexts, target Copts.

And, to date, Egypt has not effectively implemented some of its promised reforms. Last month, USCIRF released a report assessing the progress Egypt has

made in its stated intentions to reform the national school curriculum. The findings were disappointing: although the 2021-2022 school year's curriculum showed slight improvement in reducing the prevalence of religious sectarian language and rhetoric, it remained heavily religionized, with multiple subjects advancing government-endorsed versions of Sunni Islam while underrepresenting, excluding, or negatively characterizing religious minorities such as non-Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Jews. In addition to religiously inflammatory content, the curriculum's minimization of Copts' contributions sends the message to all Egyptian youth that the Christian population is an "Other" instead of an integral part of the multi-faith society of both ancient and modern Egypt.

For these reasons, during this month of remembrance for the martyrs of Maspero, and for all the Coptic victims of religious freedom violations, USCIRF renews its call on the U.S. Government to urge Egypt to fulfill its stated promises of religious tolerance and equal citizenship for Copts, and for Egyptians of every background.

Thank you very much.