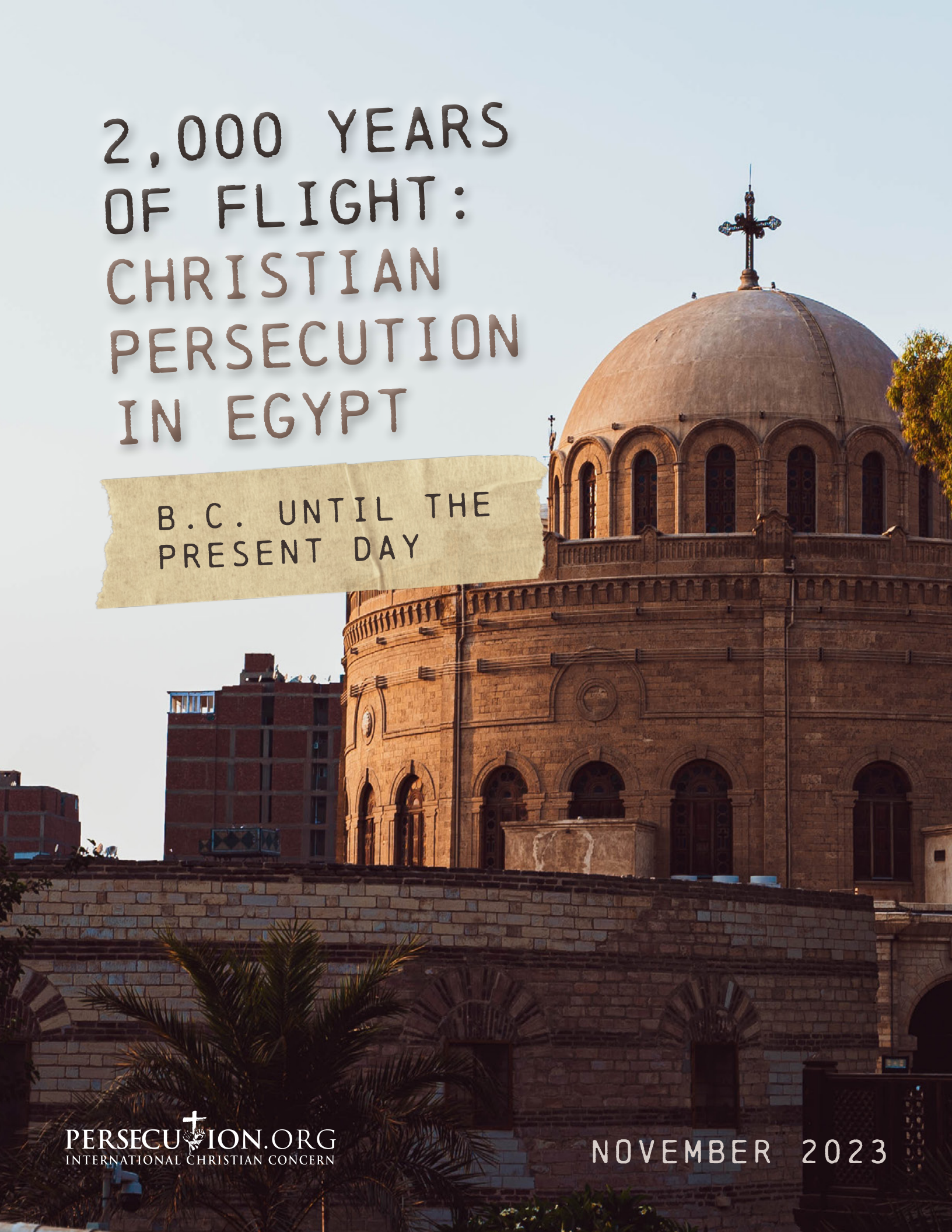
2,000 YEARS OF FLIGHT: CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN EGYPT

B.C. UNTIL THE PRESENT DAY



PERSECUTION.ORG
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

NOVEMBER 2023

"AND WHEN THEY WERE DEPARTED, BEHOLD, THE ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARETH TO JOSEPH IN A DREAM, SAYING, ARISE, AND TAKE THE YOUNG CHILD AND HIS MOTHER, AND FLEE INTO EGYPT, AND BE THOU THERE UNTIL I BRING THEE WORD: FOR HEROD WILL SEEK THE YOUNG CHILD TO DESTROY HIM." - MATTHEW 2:13

"... AND WE HAVE DWELT IN EGYPT A LONG TIME; AND THE EGYPTIANS VEXED US, AND OUR FATHERS." - NUMBERS 20:15

"WE ARE ALL EGYPTIANS"

- PRESIDENT AL-SISSI, CHRISTMAS ADDRESS TO EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANS, DECEMBER 2015, MEMRI TV



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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to inform on the historical legitimacy, influence, and precedence of Christianity – and practicing Christians – in Egypt as well as to illustrate the nature of present-day persecution through two key areas. The report delineates a brief history of Christianity in Egypt, "Coptic Christianity," and its almost unbroken sufferance from persecution since its inception as the Church of Alexandria under Mark the Evangelist. Purported persecution since the first century until the recorded "near genocide levels" of persecution today renders the Copts – Christians within Egypt – the most persecuted ethno-religious sect in world history.[1] The history of Christianity in Egypt is therefore inseparable from the history of its persecution.

This report focuses on two areas relevant to the ongoing work of International Christian Concern (ICC) and its associates in Egypt: education and the desecration of sacred sites, respectively. These areas are of direct concern to ICC with the establishment of its poverty alleviation and education provision initiative, Hope House, started in 2017, as well as its support of, and collaboration with, local Christian communities to restore and prevent physical damage to church infrastructure.

CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF COPTIC CHRISTIANITY AND ITS PERSECUTION

The history of Christian Egypt begins with the Biblical account of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, as told in the Book of Matthew; it is a tradition central to Coptic legitimacy and identity with the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1).[2] Christianity subsequently spread along the Nile Valley (Acts 2:10), and it is probably here that the first Coptic – "Egyptian Christian" – communities in Egypt were established.[3]

But Christianity as an articulate and coherent religion of the Gospels begins, in the eyes of Coptic Christians, with the mission of Mark the Evangelist – one of the four evangelists of the New Testament – and his foundation of the episcopal see of Alexandria, and thereby the Patriarchate of Alexandria, in around 33 AD. Coptic Christians generally accord with the tradition that Mark the Evangelist is John Mark, named in the Acts of the Apostles as assistant to Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys and thereby one of the 70 disciples sent out into the world by Christ (Acts 12:25; Luke 10:1): "In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border" (Is 19:19). That altar and pillar materialized in the establishment of the Catechetical School of Alexandria and later, the formation of the Holy Synod – that which brought together all members of the Coptic episcopate around 320 at the Council of Alexandria.[4]



Mark's preaching was resented by those unwilling to reject their pagan gods. Accordingly, in 68 AD, a rope was placed around his neck and his body dragged through the streets until he was dead, and he had "received the crown of martyrdom".[5] [6]

It is a scene, in appearance, as contemporary to the first century as to the 21st. Intolerance of the Christian Word in Egypt has given way to compara-

[1] https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/interim-report/

[2] Meinardus, Otto, Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity (1999) p. 1

[3] Meinardus, p. 14

[4] The 'unbroken tradition' of Mark's identity outlined by Lane; Lane, William, The Gospel of Mark (1974), pp. 21-30

[5] H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Beholder of God Mark the Evangelist Saint and Martyr (1968), Ch. 7

[6] Meinardus, p. 28

[7] https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2012/03/13/news/egypt-the-coming-persecution-1.36492993/

ble scenes of mob revolt in recent years – as in the treatment of Makram Diab in March 2015, put on trial in the province of Assiut for "insulting the Prophet" and where "two or three thousand Muslims," some carrying knives, demanded his lynching.[7] Or in the case of a Muslim mob beating a 70-year-old woman and dragging her naked through the streets of Minya, a province south of Cairo, to chants of "Allahu Akbar" in May 2016 – all on the rumorous grounds that her son had conducted an affair with a Muslim woman.[8]

In the anonymous figures of these violent groups, we can recognize the same silhouettes of the mob that killed Mark under Emperor Nero and the Roman mob that jeered at Calvary. Anonymous though many of these perpetrators may remain, defaced by injustice and the supremely inhumane acts they have committed, central to both the Biblical and present-day accounts of Christian persecution are the identities of the victims. And so in these persecuted faces, we see the faces of Paul and the other martyrs delivered by Christian history – as well as the face of Christ. Indeed, Christianity has been described as such – "the religion of faces" (Ps 17:15) – and it is telling that the iconoclasts of the eighth and ninth centuries under the Byzantine Emperor Leo III's decree, the far-reaching Protestant iconoclasts of the Reformation, and the Islamists of recent history take chisels, drills and feces to the iconographic faces of the great Christian luminaries – so offended are they by the heresy that there is a God and that he has a face.

The Coptic Church is now nearly twenty centuries old and the Copts pride themselves accordingly on the apostolicity of their national church, founded by the author of the oldest canonical gospel, and first in their unbroken chain of 118 patriarchs.[9] The German Coptologist, Otto Meinardus writes,

> The apostolic foundation of the Coptic Church is both glorious and tragic: glorious in the number of its illustrious leaders [...], tragic in the vast number of its followers who suffered martyrdom in the various persecutions for their adherence to the Christian faith.[10]

However, the outstanding contribution of the Egyptians to the Universal Church was the fourth-century monastic movement of the Desert Fathers – so-called for their formulation of a coherent Christian asceticism after "wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (Heb 11:38) all over Egypt and which thousands across Egypt and Palestine imitated.[11]

It is telling that neither the Patriarchate of Alexandria nor the Catechetical School in their exoteric and established forms exist today as they were at inception. The former split in 451 following the fourth Ecumenical Council to form the respective Greek and Coptic Orthodox Churches of Alexandria; riots destroyed the latter after the declaration of the Bishop of Rome's primacy under the Council of Constantinople in 381. Yet the continual influence of Coptic monasticism and the teachings of the Desert Fathers in the direction of world Christianity could never be quantified. At best, it might be illustrated with examples of its spiritual strength and universal appeal as a movement: the Rule of St. Benedict, the extreme asceticism of Ireland that constituted the early Celtic Christians, the Orthodox communities of the Athos peninsula, and all of the monastic revival movements of the Middle Ages in Europe.[12] Theologians further cite the religious renewals of the German evangelicals and the Methodist revival in England as being directly influenced by the principles of the Desert Fathers.[13]

But by the mid-third century, many Egyptians were persecuted under Roman rule. Coptic persecution became systematic with the Edict of Decius in 249, which inaugurated the first legitimized persecution of Christians, thus constituting the last major "Era of the Martyrs" by which modern Copts now base their calendar. By the end of the fourth century, most Egyptians were Christian – practically or nominally. After the Council of Chalcedon, which split the Church of Alexandria for the first time in 451, persecution of the Egyptian non-conformist majority under Byzantine imperial rule continued until the Arab conquest of Egypt. Later conflicts between Eastern Orthodox Greeks and Oriental Orthodox Copts between the fifth and seventh centuries resulted in permanent divisions that still stand in sentiment today.

The Islamic conquest of Egypt took place in the middle of the seventh century during Roman rule, under which

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[8] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/muslim-mob-in-egypt-strips-elderly-christian-woman-in-violent-attack

[9] Meinardus, p. 29

[10] Meinardus, p. 38

[11] Meinardus, p. 35; specifically the "Great Hermit", St Anthony and St Macarius, his disciple, who founded Antonian monasticism in the Desert of Scetis

[12] Meinardus, p. 130

[13] Burton-Christie, Douglas, The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism (1993), pp. 7-9

Copts were relegated to the status of "*dhimmi*" – a historical term for non-Muslims living within an Islamic protectorate. As late as 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood reportedly applied "*Jizya*," a poll tax dolled according to this religious-ethnic status, in Egypt on 15,000 Christian Copts. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) announced it intended to extract Jizya from Christians in the city of Raqqa, Syria, to the result of forced conversion, expulsion, or execution.[14] [15] Much of the rulings under the conquest are unchanged – either in wording or practical application – today. Under the Pact of Umar, measures included a ban on the building of new churches and monasteries and existing restorations, a prohibition of external hanging of crosses on churches, a maximum elevation of churches, and a ban on Palm Sunday and Easter parades – at one point Epiphany and Easter were outlawed – as well as a prohibition on non-Muslims to employ or govern Muslims.

The Pact of Umar (or some version of it) would remain in place for centuries, influencing later legislation in the Ottoman Empire such as the Hamayouni Decree in 1856 – the legal foundation for the Egyptian state's control of church property – which stipulated the issuance of permits for any church construction or maintenance by the Sultan, and in 1934, the Ten Conditions of Al-Ezabi, which remained until 1999 when Mubarak removed the need for state permission. "Only those things that were too difficult to demolish were spared" so says the chronicler Yahia after the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 1009. Indeed, Copts lost their majority status in the 12th century as a result of the scaled destruction and persecution that came under a succession of Caliphates and Sultanates as well as the Ottoman Empire – having only brief legal equality during Emperor Napoleon's short rule.

> Apostasy from the faith of Islam is considered a most heinous sin, and must be punished with death, unless the apostate will recant on being thrice warned. I once saw a woman paraded through the streets of Cairo, and afterwards taken down to the Nile to be drowned, for having apostatized from the faith of Muhammad, and having married a Christian.[16]

So states the British Orientalist, Edward William Lane, of what he observed in Egypt – the lived persecution of the Christian people – in the 1820s. It was one of the first modern European witness accounts of an execution of an apostate – in this case, a female convert exposed by her Coptic cross tattoo – and one that seems contemporary to today. The situation improved for Egypt's Coptic community when Mohammed Ali Pasha became the country's hereditary ruler in 1841 – a reign during which two Copts were appointed Prime Ministers.[17] Ali accordingly introduced reforms that improved the social position of Copts: they were allowed to own land and attain government positions, and in 1874, he created a council to represent the Coptic community called the "Majlis Al-Milli." British interference – securing the first Christian prime minister in 1878 – and colonial rule promoted Christians in civil society to the point that 40% of landowners were Christian. This subsequently contributed to the formation of an Egyptian "national identity" – "one people worshipping the same God in two different ways," asserted one 20th-century patriarch – which led to a unity between Christians and Muslims that called for an end to British occupation. In 1919, Egyptian nationalists flew flags emblazoned with both the Crescent and Cross, but this apparent unity was fundamentally altered when Gamel Abdel Nasser overthrew the monarchy in 1952 under a military coup that caused a huge retreat of Christians from public life and emigration with many middle-class Christians turning in refuge to the monasteries. A retreat which, ironically under the Socialist policies of an Arab nationalist after 1948, temporarily reversed monastic decline; now only 30 Coptic monasteries and 1,600 monks remain in Egypt today.[18]

In 1981, President Sadat internally exiled the Coptic Pope Shenouda III on grounds of fomenting inter-confessional strife, to which the president then chose five Coptic bishops to select a new pope. This represented arguably the most high-profile example of the Egyptian government's intervention in the clerical life of the Coptic Church; it represents modern Egypt's systematic denial of the Coptic Church's legitimacy as an independent religious body in the country. In 1985, under President Mubarak, Pope Shenouda was restored, while two Coptic ministers and one governor were appointed by the President. However, the status of Coptic Christians in Egyptian society has largely remained unchanged since Sadat assumed power in 1970: there is little Christian representation in either national or local government and sectarian violence is commonplace – all buttressed by the imbalance of Christian and re-

[14] https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/10/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-convert-islam-or-pay-jiz/

[15] https://web.archive.org/web//http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28381455

[16] Lane, Edward William. An Account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians (1860), p. 108.

[17] Tadros, Samuel, "Egypt", Christianity in North Africa and West Asia (2018), pp. 68-79

[18] Ibid.

[19] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-egypt-under-sissi-is-really-like-for-coptic-christians/

ligious minority legal rights.[19] Neither, infamously so, has there been a Coptic football player for the national team.

During the 1990s, attacks on Christians became increasingly prevalent when the scope was widened to include those that terrorists viewed as collaborators with the security forces. However, while many Christians have supported the current president, Sissi, with his apparent respect for minority rights in Egypt, there is an imbalance between the theoretical and legal rights of Christians and their application. Under the 2014 constitution, Egyptians enjoy the "absolute" freedom of religion while also declaring Islam as the state religion and conversion from Islam to any other religion forbidden.

Congratulating Egyptian Christians on Christmas in 2015, Sissi's declaration that "we are all Egyptians, what divides us destroys us" chimed with the sentiments of Pope Shenuda's assertion that "as Copts, we are Egyptians." The former asserted the triumph of national unity over sectarian division; the latter insinuated that such unity has excluded Copts in practice.[20] A further problem with state "equality" legislation is that it prevents the Egyptian authorities from treating the common persecution of Christians as different from the persecution of anyone else in the country; Sissi and the authorities accordingly do not recognize the Copts as a minority that warrants exceptional protection.[21] As of 2016, his government includes a mere 36 Christians out of a total of 596 members, and most alarmingly, the government has yet to achieve justice for the Maspero massacre in October 2011, and the reconstruction of churches damaged in the sectarian attacks of 2013 has been wholly inadequate despite government promises to the contrary.

A century ago, Christians comprised around 20% of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) population; today, they are less than 4%, totaling an estimated 15 million.[22] Statistics on Christian and minority populations from the MENA region are notoriously arbitrary – factual records being frustrated by political upheaval, war, and foreign intervention – but the Egyptian Christian population in the past century has always been lower than this standard. The 1927 census found that around 8.3% of the Egyptian population identified as Christian while the most recent census in 2006 found that around 5.1% of the population were Christian – the Sisi government was reluctant to encourage sectarianism by dividing the population by religion.[23] [24]

Indeed, the relationship between the Islamist groups – notably the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS who predominate in the Sinai peninsula – the Copts, and the government is complex; the former is keen to embarrass the latter after the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's government in 2013, leaving Christians as "pawns [...] in the struggle between Sisi and the extremist groups." The Islamist groups accordingly use "the bombing of churches, and the subsequent displays of Christian persecution in the media [as a] way of showing Sisi-'s powerlessness."[25] Sisi's legitimacy in the eyes of the United States and the European Union is one predicated on the promise, or at least the appearance, of national stability; the Islamic State "has repeatedly vowed to go after Egypt's Christians as punishment for their support of [Sisi] and show that the state is unable to protect the Copts."[26]

Critics of Sissi cite that while the parliament worked to pass a bill that would ease governmental permissions for church building in 2017, security officials in practice thwart or halt construction entirely – a legislative inheritance from the Islamic conquest that is still visible today.[27] Neither does the government officially recognize conversions from Islam to Christianity, interfaith marriages, and the offspring of such arrangements. Disputes between Christians and Muslims revert to the local application of law by *Qa'ada Arab* – meaning "men sitting" – which invariably favors Muslims; crimes against Christians often go unreported for fear of legal injustice or governmental intervention.

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[20] https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-president-al-sisi-congratulates-christians-christmas-we-are-all-egyptians-what-divides

[21] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-egypt-under-sissi-is-really-like-for-coptic-christians/

[22] The majority of MENA states do not provide accurate statistics regarding their Christian population; cf. Weiner, J. R., Middle Eastern Christians: Battered, violated, and abused, do they have any chance of survival? (2014), Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs; http://jcpa.org/text/book.pdf

[23]https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/#:~:text=The%20most%20recent%20census%2C%20in,-Egyptians%20were%20Muslim%20in%202010.

[24] Giovanni, Janine, The Vanishing (2021), p. 165

[25] Ibid., p. 168

[26] Begemy Naseem Nasr, priest of the Church of St Mary, Minya; Ibid., p. 168

[27] https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/04/09/twin-attacks-kill-at-least-45-christians-in-egypt

CHAPTER II: EDUCATION

The impact of poverty and lack of access to education impact some Egyptian communities more than others. Women – who are about 10% less literate than men – and Christian minorities, who often find themselves marginalized when trying to access social services like schools, can be particularly vulnerable.

CONTEXT

Studies conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Education Commission indicate that, globally, 171 million people would be lifted out of extreme poverty if every child entered the workforce with the ability to read.[28] Poverty can be extremely cyclical, with illiteracy fueling poverty and poverty fueling illiteracy. This cycle often spans generations with poor families sometimes forced to pull their children out of school early to help provide for the family.

In Egypt, which ranks among the lowest in the world in spending on education at just 2.5% of GDP, generational poverty and illiteracy are concerningly prevalent. The Egyptian Constitution mandates that spending on education be maintained at a minimum of 4% of GDP, but this requirement has not been met in recent years, much to the harm of Egypt's educational performance.

According to U.S. government estimates, about 32% of Egypt's population lives below the poverty line and only 73% are literate, below the global average though in the range to be expected in a developing country.[29] The lack of robust education is a detriment to Egypt's students, the largest student population in the Middle East with approximately 20 million students in the public system alone, and to its hopes of economic progress and development.

In addition to being underfunded and inaccessible to some, Egypt's educational system is also designed in a way that actively promotes the majoritarian Sunni view of Islam, promoting discrimination toward religious minorities. The government has made some improvements over the years, but more work remains to be done as discriminatory content remains. Topics such as language and social studies are of particular concern, with curricula containing antisemitic and discriminatory language toward Christians, Jews, and non-Sunni Muslims. Homework furthers an exclusionary perspective of Islam, leaving religious minority students in a difficult position at school. According to reports, Islamic religious studies in the Egyptian primary curriculum contain references to the "treacherous nature" and "vile history of the Jews."[30]

In public-run schools, students are divided into Muslim and Christian groups based on their officially recognized religious affiliation for religious studies. The idea of this structure is to allow students to study their own religion, though Jewish and other minority students are not allowed to study their religion separately. There have also been reports of inadequate numbers of Christian teachers to teach these classes.

ANALYSIS

Egypt's education system is federally operated – a structure that allows both systematic abuse and the potential for systemic improvement if adequately addressed. The public schools are overcrowded, understaffed, and lack the necessary tools and materials, such as labs, to teach effectively. As a result, though most Egyptian students attend public school, it is common for families with sufficient means to supplement their children's education through private lessons after school.

Two problems exist within this divided system. First, the requirement that families pay for private lessons increases the divide, both socially and economically, between the rich and the poor. With private lessons being critical to high performance, due to the poor quality of instruction in the public school system, students without the resources to obtain these lessons are left behind, unable to perform in school, and disadvantaged when competing for jobs after graduation.

Though there is nothing inherently wrong with private lessons, the necessity of these lessons for quality education is an exacerbating factor in a country already deeply divided. In many cases, the children who cannot afford private lessons are also the Christians and other religious minorities that society has pushed to its edges. When unable to

[28] https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/5-ways-education-can-help-end-extreme-poverty

[29] https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/egypt/#people-and-society

[30] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/2022%20Egypt%20Curriculum.pdf

take private lessons, the generational poverty cycle continues.

Second, the Egyptian government is cracking down on providers of private lessons, raiding tutoring centers, detaining teachers, confiscating materials, and closing down the centers, according to a 2022 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).[31] "The official media narrative endorsed by the state celebrates these raids as 'waging war on private lessons,'" according to the USCIRF report, "and describes the centers as mafia or big business, blaming the phenomenon on the financial greed of business owners and parents." The government closed some 15,145 private tutoring centers in the second half of 2020 alone, according to the Ministry of Education.

In practice, the crackdown on these tutoring centers acts as a damper on the overall success of Egyptian students, though they have been ineffective overall, and private tutoring centers are still a common phenomenon used by many families to help their students pass exams. And though the centers are outside of the public education system, the government's description of them as mafias taking economic advantage of children is an inaccurate caricature that fails to take into account charitable organizations, such as ICC, which tutor the children as a community service.

With a broken public education system on its hands, the government's decision to eliminate private tutoring does not help Egyptians generally or minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Though they may be impacted by unequal access to private tutoring, responsibility for the issues they face lies solidly on the failed public education system rather than the individuals and organizations trying to make up the gap.

CASE STUDY: HOPE HOUSE

ICC's tutoring center, Hope House, seeks to combat the generational persecution that Christians face by providing critical education and all-around support for children and their families. The ICC child sponsorship program associated with Hope House ensures that families have adequate nutritional, medical, and spiritual care by providing educational incentives, medical attention, nutritional support, and additional gifts and activities.

The initiative has had a profound impact on hundreds of young people, including young girls who have particularly limited educational opportunities and face other obstacles because of persecution. Over 300 students are enrolled in Hope House at one time and put into classes a third the size of public school classes, which allows for more effective teaching.

Hope House seeks to empower these young women and encourage them to consider what their futures could look like. Many impoverished Christian communities in Egypt believe that there is little place for women in education. Families need girls to maintain the household, a task that does not require formal education. Yet, it is this mindset from cycles of generational persecution that limits the community and opportunities for young women.

Programs like Hope House can also work to break down divides between communities. "I learned from the lesson of love how to love all people and help my family at home," one young beneficiary says of her time at the center. She is involved in discipleship classes with a local partner church and learns the Biblical basis for education and caring for others. When asked about her dreams, she says that she wishes "to become a famous actress," adding that she has "acted in many plays at church."

Another demographic often kept from adequate education due to poverty is firstborn sons, who are traditionally called upon to help support the family financially by entering the workforce as soon as possible. The issues that they face, though, are common to Christian children across Egypt, who typically struggle to attend college or pursue higher education.

As beneficial as programs like Hope House are, the scale of the problem renders their efforts inadequate. More than 50% of eligible students seeking Hope House assistance lack a sponsor to fund their supplemental education.

"I have learned reading quickly, the alphabet, words, spelling, and punctuation," said one Hope House student of a recent summer course. "I also have learned to obey God and ignore the devil." Empowering children through education allows students like this one to pursue their own betterment, which in turn supports the whole Christian community and Egypt as a whole.

[31] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/2022%20Egypt%20Curriculum.pdf

CHAPTER III: VANDALISM, DESTRUCTION AND ICONOCLASM

CONTEXT

The material persecution of Coptic heritage in Egypt has been recorded as ongoing since the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian beginning in 284 AD, known as the Diocletianic Persecution, which became known as the "Era of Martyrs" and a period during which numerous Christian churches and sites were destroyed – notably the destruction of Abu Mena, a renowned site of pilgrimage for the early Copts near Alexandria. The destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem under the Roman Emperor Constantius II in 356 AD showed the vulnerability of organized Christianity under the imperial rule of the Roman Empire in the east – including Egypt.

Persecution under Roman rule, as previously outlined, was intensified under the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century. Christians were viewed as polytheistic "*dhimmis*" under Islamic law after the conquest. Indeed they still are by Muslims intolerant of the faith not to mention the application of the law in practice today. This course of persecution has inevitably been punctuated by attacks on sacred sites, churches, heritage, and infrastructure of Egyptian Christians of all denominations and, alarmingly, against Coptic churches abroad as witnessed in the 2021 attack against a Coptic Orthodox church in British Columbia, Canada.[32]

ANALYSIS

The prevalent Islamist groups of ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood see the presence of sacred Christian sites as an affront to Islam in Egypt, which has effectively prevailed as the dominant religion since it formally arrived with the Arab invasion. Despite President Mubarak's restoration of Pope Shenouda III – internally exiled in 1981 by President Sadat – in 1985, reports of attacks on Christian sites became more prevalent, partly due to foreign NGO intervention and increasingly accurate data. Assaults on Christian sites and places of worship became common in the second half of Mubarak's regime. In February and April 2001, ICC reported that armed Muslims burned a church and 35 Christian homes in Egypt.[33]

Following the dispersal of the sit-ins in Cairo by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in August 2013, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported a wave of vandalism against churches; vandals torched and looted Christian property in an unprecedentedly dense series of attacks that "fell on deaf ears," according to the group which also noted that "security forces were largely absent or failed to intervene even when they had been informed of ongoing attacks," leaving 4 dead, 37 churches and schools burned or damaged, and 5 sites attacked without damage.

> Crowds of men attacked at least 42 churches, burning or damaging 37, as well as dozens of other Christian religious institutions in the governorates of Minya, Asyut, Fayum, Giza, Suez, Sohag, Bani Suef, and North Sinai. Human Rights Watch has verified with family members and a lawyer that at least three Coptic Christians and one Muslim were killed as a result of sectarian attacks in Dalga, Minya city, and Cairo.[34]

Islamists have identified Coptic Christians as co-conspirators, or at least supporters of the coup *d'etat* that ousted President Mohammad Morsi in July 2013. The attacks came after weeks of sectarian discourse by the Brotherhood at two Cairo sit-ins where speakers claimed a link between the Copts and Morsi's removal; "Copts and communists are supporting Sisi in the killing of Muslims," claimed Assem Abdel Magid, one of the speakers.35 In addition to this Islamist rhetoric, residents and priests told HRW that local groups and religious leaders also incited groups to target Christian-owned homes and businesses. In the week following Morsi's removal from office, several properties were marked with a black "X" denoting a Coptic owner in the city of Minya:

> One Christian shop owner in Minya, Alfons Massoud, 70, said that at 3:30 p.m. on August 14, young boys with knives and between 20 and 30 bearded men with guns attacked and burned a neighboring shop bearing the X mark. He said that they torched his shop after seeing that it had a Coptic name.[36]

The attacks and rhetoric were and continue to be denounced by Muslim leaders, including figures within the Muslim Brotherhood. However, it is difficult to discern how confined this rhetoric is to Islamism versus mainstream Is-

[32] https://aleteia.org/2021/07/20/coptic-orthodox-church-burns-down-in-western-canada/

[33] https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=9C0zAAAAIBAJ&pg=6308,5873985&dq=international-christian-concern&hl=en

[34] https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/21/egypt-mass-attacks-churches

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

lam; Bishop Makarios told HRW that he heard local mosque preachers inciting sectarian attacks before the violence in Minya, saying words to the effect of "Islam is in danger, the infidels will eradicate Islam."[37] The Bishop noted that around 80 churches in the area had received anonymous phone calls threatening attacks in the week leading up to August 14.





The Archangel Michael Church in Kerdasa, near the pyramids of Giza and 16 miles from Cairo, was another target of Islamist violence – widely reported across Western media.[38] After supporters of the deposed Morsi were driven from opposition camps in Cairo, Kerdasa became another victim of mob violence; a chandelier, various holy texts, and icons were among the debris scattered around the church's courtyard while it burned.

"We were about six people here, and they attacked us, about 1,000 people. There were a lot of them and they were very fierce. They had Molotovs [gas bombs] and knives," church guard Rida Gaballah told NBC News.

Graffiti sprayed on the walls of the church, built in the 1940s, read "Allah u Akbar," "Egypt is Islamic," and "Sisi is a murderer" – referring to the future prime minister and army chief at the time.[39] The *coup* subsequently represented another fundamental change in relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt:

"Historically the relations were fine between Muslims and Christians in this area, it only got turned upside down when Morsi left power," a local church guard at Kerdasa said, "When they cleared Rabaa and Nahda, they destroyed this church and the whole country."[40]

An outright civil war was prevented by a renewed sense of solidarity between moderate Muslims, as well as the absence of retaliation from the Coptic community. To the contrary, the spokesman cited added that "he could forgive the crowd that allegedly ransacked the church," to which a parishioner added that:

> I don't think that we really need a big staff of military people surrounding the church, because at the end of the day, I am telling you the Egyptians will not allow the minority to do these harmful attacks to our churches [...] we have faith in the country, I have faith in the people. I believe in the people, Christians or Muslims.[41]



The solidarity between Muslims and Christians has been witnessed in public on several occasions in recent history (Cf. 2011 New Year's Day church bombings), as well as days after the deposition in August 2013, where both Muslims and Christians were shown in central Cairo defending each other in prayer. The solidarity has extended to politics, with Muslims and Christians publicly opposing the Mubarak regime (Cf. Christian-Muslim solidarity in Tahrir Square. image, February 2011) together.[42] ICC continues to pray for the peaceful cooperation and coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Egypt.

[37] Ibid.

[38] https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/coptic-church-destroyed-mob-uncertainty-about-egypts-future-flna6c10946707

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12407793



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