**Egypt's Persecuted Christians**

Violence against Copts is on the rise and all but ignored by the state.

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A few weeks ago in the coastal city of Marsa Matrouh, an enraged mob of some 3,000 angry Muslims gathered after Friday prayers. After the mosque's imam exhorted them to cleanse the city of its infidel Christians, called Copts, they went on a rampage.

The toll was heavy: 18 homes, 23 shops and 16 cars were completely destroyed, while 400 Copts barricaded themselves in their church for 10 hours until the frenzy died out.

This was only the latest of more than a dozen such attacks during the past year, including in the village of Kafr El-Barbary on June 26, the town of Farshout on Nov. 21, and the village of Shousha on Nov. 23. Then came Naga Hamadi, where passengers in a drive-by car fired at random into Christians leaving a Coptic Christmas service on Jan. 6. The massacre killed seven and left 26 seriously wounded.

Although the Copts have long been the target of sporadic attacks, the violence of the last few years is more like a purge, as waves of mob assaults have forced hundreds, sometimes thousands of Christian citizens to flee their homes. In each incident the police, despite frantic appeals, invariably arrive after the violence is over. Later the injured are coerced by the special security police forces into accepting "reconciliation" with their attackers, in order to avoid the prosecution of the guilty. No Muslim to date has been convicted for any of these crimes.

The state's lack of regard for the Copts has encouraged anti-Christian feelings among many Muslims in all walks of life. Even Al-Azhar, the world's preeminent Sunni Islamic institution, has contributed its share to this widespread hostility by publishing a pamphlet declaring the Bible a corrupted document and Christianity a pagan religion.

Al-Azhar's textbook for its high-school students, called "Al Iqna'," states that killing a Muslim is punishable by death, but if a Muslim kills a non-Muslim he is not subject to capital punishment since the superior cannot be punished for killing the inferior (p. 146). It also states that the blood money (compensation for manslaughter) rates for a woman is half that for a man, but for a Christian or Jew it is one third that of a Muslim (p. 187); and that there can be no stewardship (such as a superior in work) of a non-Muslim over a Muslim (p. 205).

Thus the hundreds of thousands of Azhar schools, which are monitored by the state, indoctrinate and then discharge annually into Egyptian society hundreds of thousands of young Muslims with an ideology of intolerance, contempt and hatred toward Copts (and even more intensely toward Jews).

Egypt's Christian Copts, about 12% of the population, have long been subject to customary and official discrimination. No church, for example, can be built or even repaired without a presidential decree. Copts are excluded from the intelligence and security services because they are deemed a security risk. This discrimination springs from a belief deeply grounded in the social psyche of the ruling elite and large sectors of the Muslim community that it is unreasonable in an Islamic society to expect strict equality between Muslims and the infidels.

In effect, the Copts today are treated as dhimmis—the age-old inferior status of Christian and Jewish minorities in Muslim lands. Dhimmi status is no longer legalized but continues to operate as a traditional social norm. Thus, for example, an individual offense by a dhimmi against a Muslim warrants retribution for the entire dhimmi community.

Despite the long-standing suffering of the Copts, the Egyptian government cynically insists that there is no sectarian problem and brands as traitors those who draw international attention to the Copts' plight. So far the United States and the rest of the Western democracies, despite repeated Coptic appeals, have done little besides calling upon the Egyptian regime to foster greater tolerance.

But the dhimmi status of the Copts will not be changed by sweet persuasion. It will only change by persistent domestic struggle supported by vigorous international pressure. The Copts do not demand the tolerance of Muslims but equal rights with them.