



Deir Gabal al-Tayr Events, September 2014

The village of Deir Gabal al-Tayr, known for being the site of the Monastery of the Virgin, lies east of Samalout in the Minya governorate. It is home to some 10,000 people, all of them Christians except for less than 100 citizens. The village is known as a Christian religious pilgrimage site, having played host to the Holy Family during its flight into Egypt. Most of the villagers, like most of the residents of villages on the east bank of the Nile, work in quarries and commercial endeavors, which has fostered a network of work and trade relationships between the residents of Deir Gabal al-Tayr and several nearby, Muslim-majority towns. This net-

work has at times helped to calm sectarian violence and at other contributed to rising tensions. The district of Samalout occasionally witnesses sectarian tension and violence, most recently in August, when there were two incidents. The first, in the village of North Nazlat Yaaqoub, saw fighting between village Muslims and Christians due to the construction of a church, the Mar Girgis Church. Security forces stopped construction. Secondly, Salamout police forces banned prayers in the Church of Father Kyrillos and Pope Kyrillos, where religious services were previously held, citing the lack of an official license for the church.



Deir Gabal al-Tayr saw one sectarian incident in 2009, which devolved into clashes with residents of al-Abed, which lies to the south. Some residents of Deir Gabal al-Tayr had purchased a plot of land from the governorate to use as a cemetery and constructed a wall around it. Some local residents of Abed trespassed over the wall and clashes resulted. Security forces detained several people from both sides, whom they later released.

On the 3rd of September 2014, a Christian woman, Iman Morqos Sarufim, disappeared. Her husband, Sameh Erian, filed a police report at the Samalout police station (no. 6427/Samalout administrative) accusing a Muslim from the nearby village of Beni Khaled, Sami Ahmed Abd al-Rahman, known as Hamada al-Gilfi, of causing her disappearance. The next day, the district director of investigations informed Erian that his wife had decided to leave her home of her own free will with the man accused of helping her to disappear. It was unknown, the policeman said, whether Sarufim had converted to Islam.

Sameh Erian said in a statement to an EIPR researcher:

“What some security officials are saying—that my wife Iman fled of her own free will to convert to Islam—is untrue. My wife is religious and there are no problems between us. We understand each other. We’ve been married for 19 years and have five children. My wife left [the house] in her slippers at 3 pm. She was going to her father’s house, but she didn’t come back. Later we learned that Hamada al-Gilfi kidnapped her in a dark blue private car. I got a phone call from his brother two hours after her abduction saying that his brother had kidnaped my wife.”

Testimonies collected by EIPR confirmed that Erian and Hamada al-Gilfi have a business partnership and exchange family visits. They all said that members of the family warned Erian about this type of relationship and held him responsible for his wife’s disappearance. The story of the woman’s disappearance spread to neighboring villages, having a negative impact on relations between residents of Deir Gabal al-Tayr and nearby villages, especially considering Egyptian rural culture, which sees a married woman going out with a person other than her husband as a social stigma. This is in addition to the general sensitivity of religious conversion, especially in the countryside. Exacerbating this is that the Erian’s brother is Father Yoannis Erian, a priest in Samalout. Some residents of Deir Gabal al-Tayr have met with verbal ridicule and harassment from residents of nearby villages, being the butt of various scornful wisecracks, including, “Hamada plays and Deir [Gabal al-Tayr] goes up in flames,”

“Help yourself, Hamada,” and “A town without men.” On the 7th of September, dozens of Coptic residents demonstrated in front of the village police station demanding that security commanders be summoned to search for the woman and return her to her family. The director of Minya criminal investigations and national security arrived, along with the district police chief and security leaders from the governorate and the district; they promised the locals to take action and return Serufim within days. Some villagers also met the governor of Minya, Gen. Salah Ziyada, and security director Gen. Osama Metwalli, who promised Serufim’s return within two days, according to several statements from local residents.



Mukhtar Yunan, a member of Erian’s family, told EIPR: “We went to the security director and staged a protest to ask for the security director. Hisham Nasr, the director of criminal investigations in the governorate, and many leaders came and promised that they would return her within days. We also met the governor. They promised that the whole matter would be over in two days.”

On 15 September, the children of the missing woman mobilized village youth to again demonstrate in front of the local police station, where they accused the security apparatus of dereliction of duty and said that the delay would give more time to “the kidnaper” and his aides to complete Sarufim’s conversion to Islam. Several hundred people assembled that afternoon, estimated by local residents at more than 800. The protestors chanted slogans condemning the Interior Ministry’s failure to return Sarufim and demanded her return.

The head of the Deir Gabal al-Tayr police station contacted his superiors in the Samalout station to inform them and receive directives, according to the testimony of a police officer. At approximately 10, two police trucks arrived, one of them carrying the Samalout police chief. When the truck reached the environs of the police station, some young people approached it to speak with the police chief. The chief feared an attack, seeing a great many demonstrators were running toward his vehicle. The truck thus reversed to leave the site as a member of the security detail fired in the air, which stoked the anger of the demonstrators.

One local resident told an EIPR researcher:

“The problem is 800 people demonstrated in front of the Deir Gabal al-Tayr police station, most of them young people. Security at the station contacted the commanders at the Samalout police station and summoned them. The police chief came. When the youths gathered around the car to speak to him, he reversed and the security man fired in the air. A policeman from Beni Khaled, which is where the kidnapper is from, responded with fire in turn. The kids got angry and threw bricks at the force and broke the windshield of a police car and a fire truck.”

Local residents met by the EIPR researcher told a different story than security forces about what happened in the minutes after this incident. The villagers say that a policeman from nearby Beni Khaled, the home of the person accused of the kidnapping, fired in the air from the other direction. The demonstrators responded by pelting the police chief’s vehicle and the police station with bricks and stones, which broke some windows and damaged a police truck and a civil defense vehicle. In contrast, the security apparatus, in an official statement issued by the security directorate and in an interview between the EIPR researcher and an officer stationed in the village, claims that some local residents fired in the air and threw stones at the police station and security forces, damaging two vehicles and injuring three unnamed security personnel with unspecified injuries for which they required treatment. The local residents deny this.

The director of Minya security, Gen. Osama Metwalli, said in a telephone interview with Dream’s “Ten in the Evening” talk show on Thursday, 18th of September, “The disappearance of this woman is known to everyone. There’s no criminal suspicion. There was no compulsion, the evidence being that the person they say kidnapped her is known by her husband. Nevertheless, we are making exhaustive efforts searching for her, and not just the Minya security directorate, but all bodies in the ministry are searching to return this woman at the soonest available opportunity.”¹ Metwalli added, “What happened is that more than 400 people gathered in front of the police station, and when the district forces came, they attacked them, injuring three police personnel and damaging a police vehicle and fire truck. They were brought under control on the street, and those who took part in the events were arrested.”

1- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MS9zNy5xJ4>





The demonstrators dispersed from in front of the police station after the police chief of the Samalout station left the village. At midnight, a security detail came to the village and attacked numerous homes, smashing their contents, beating and degrading the homeowners, and arresting dozens, who were detained first at the local police station and then at the Samalout station. Twelve of them were referred to the Public Prosecution while the other detainees were released.

The EIPR sent a researcher to investigate the facts in the village on the 22nd of September. He obtained various statements regarding police abuses from eyewitnesses and victims. Two statements said that more than 50 police transport trucks and several police APCs arrived at midnight on Thursday, the 16th of September. Security forces moved in groups combing the village and storming homes. According to an officer who participated in the campaign and spoke with the EIPR researcher, Samalout investigations had prepared investigations with the names of persons wanted for participating in or inciting the demonstrations.

Several local residents confirmed that the security campaign targeted more than 30 houses. Occupants of many of these houses had not taken part in the demonstrations in front of the police station and had no relationship with Sarufim.

Each security group stormed several houses, smashing furniture, televisions, and the windshields of cars parked out front.

The EIPR researcher visited 11 homes in the village that were subjected to raids and vandalism, where the occupants were beaten and many arrested. He observed smashed satellite receivers, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, computers, and telephones, as well as several cars with broken windshields parked in front of these houses.

The researcher obtained video testimonies regarding the magnitude of the violations local residents faced. The homes observed included those of Emad Abduh Labib, Hani Amin, Walid Masoud Gadallah, Mukhtar Yunan, Atef Malak Aziz, Fakhri Abadir Awad, Rifaat Abduh Riyad, Michel Nashi Aziz, Mina Joseph Adli,



a line and be dragged to the police station, as security personnel hit them. In some cases, women said that they had been hit when they objected to the beating of their children. Several people interviewed by the EIPR researcher also said that police personnel stole money, mobile phones, and gold jewelry from their homes. Mukhtar Yunan, whose home was raided by police and whose son-in-law was arrested, said:

“We were sleeping when the security forces entered. They did even worse than what ISIS does. They broke everything in their path, more than LE40,000 worth of Coca-Cola cartons. They stole phones and smashed the jeep that was outside the house, they broke doors and cabinets and appliances. They destroyed the house. Even my wife—when they hit a ten-year-old boy, she said, “What did that boy do?” The soldier slapped her on the face. And all they kept saying is, “Wait till you see what we do to you, you infidels.”

According to statements obtained by the EIPR, 60–80 people were arrested and taken to the local police station. They were slapped and hit on the face while in the station and forced to repeat insulting phrases.

At around 3 am, 32 people were taken to the Samalout police station, where police forced them to stand with their arms raised and at times beat them with batons. In the next few hours, several of the arrestees were taken from inside the station jail and released. The police referred 12 people to the Samalout Summary Prosecution: Michel Nashi Aziz, Ayman Nazmi Adli, Mina Rifaat Abduh, Emad Amin Bastaourus, Malak Girgis, Milad Girgis, Sobhi Sami, Sa-

Malak Hanin Farid, and Shenouda Saad Wahba.

Statements from residents of Deir Gabal al-Tayr agreed that police treated them in a demeaning manner, cursing them and using sectarian language, such as “A town without a man,” “You unbelieving ingrates, what are you going to do,” and “This is what those who attack the government get.”

Several people in the homes stormed were also physically assaulted, including children and women. In most cases, a similar pattern of conduct played out. After the police searched the house, they would beat the men with batons, ropes, and sharp implements. After the home was searched, one or more persons would be taken from the home, especially men under the age of 40. Their hands were bound behind their back and they were forced to walk to a collection point in the street. When the number of arrestees reached about 20, they would be bound with a rope in

bri Masoud, Malak Hanin Farid, Khalaf Benyamin, Bishoi Mishmish Ayyad, and Shenoud Saad Wahba.

The Samalout Prosecution ordered them detained four days pending investigations into the assault on security forces, the injury of three policemen, and the damage to two police vehicles and a civil defense vehicle. The next day, the prosecution renewed detention for an additional 15 days. In a hearing to contest the remand order on the 23rd of September 2014, the Samalout Appellate Misdemeanor Court released the defendants on bail of LE5,000 each, based on the fact that police investigations found that the assembly had been spontaneous and unorganized.

On the 23rd of September, Father Agathon, the bishop of Maghagha and al-Adwa; Father Yoannis Kamal, the brother-in-law of the missing woman; Father Estafanos Shehata, the priest of the Samalout diocese; Nashi Azizi, the mayor of Deir Gabal al-Tayr; Ehab Ramzi, a lawyer; and his brother Judge Amir Ramzi, the head of the Shubra al-Kheima Criminal Court met with Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, head of Homeland Security Gen Khaled Tharwat, and several Interior Ministry leaders. According to a telephone interview with Father Estafanos Shehata, the meeting addressed several issues, including the events in Deir Gabal al-Tayr, the seven churches closed down in the city and the Samalout district by order of the security apparatus, kidnappings, and the extortion of protection money from Copts in Upper Egypt.

Father Estafanos added that the interior minister confirmed that Sarufim had converted to Islam on 15 September. He promised to bring her before the Public Prosecution and to organize a meeting between her and her family. He had

solicited a memorandum from Sheikh al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb and Pope Tawadros II approving the reinstatement of Religious Advice and Guidance Sessions, which were suspended in 2004. Gen. Khaled Tharwat also promised to study the matter of the closed churches.

On 26 September, the missing woman, Iman Morqos Sarufim, appeared in a video broadcast by MCN, a news network for Christians of the Middle East from her home. She stated that she had been kidnapped from in front of her father's home under threat of arms. Though attempts had been made to compel her to change her religion, she said she was still a Christian and that the interior minister's statement regarding her conversion to Islam was false.²

"They took me to al-Azhar," she said. "I was overjoyed, I cried and ran outside. They put a face veil on a woman and she went into al-Azhar and said the shahada. She photographed me in a headscarf, and they stuck my photo on the [conversion] certificate."

She added, "The interior minister who came out and told my family that I converted to Islam is a liar. None of that happened, I didn't convert or any such thing. The head of the Samalout district was in on this whole business. He knew the people who kidnapped me and told them to stay away and not come, to wait until things calmed down."

Subsequent to this, the Samalout Archbishopric issued a press statement urging the media to close the file on the woman of Deir Gabal al-Tayr, to protect what it called "social peace" and her family, and leave matters to official state channels.

2- http://www.mcndirect.com/vgallery_ar.aspx?aid=569&vid=2473