



**Two years of sectarian violence:  
What happened? Where do we begin?**

**An analytical study of January 2008-January 2010**

**Freedom of Religion and Belief Program  
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights  
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## Introduction

1. Egypt is no different than other societies comprised of individuals and groups espousing different religious beliefs and affiliated with various religious communities. Many societies are able to live with these differences and, indeed, build on this diversity to enrich public life. Other societies, whether by design or default, are unable to manage diversity, some to the extent that they are unable to uphold coexistence. One of the most significant manifestations of social sectarian tension is the outbreak of violence between individuals or groups of various religious communities, like those seen with increasing frequency in Egypt over the last few years. With time, and without the proper intervention of the state, these events become more common and varied, and spread geographically. If a society reaches this point, it must realize that it faces a real danger of becoming a society of isolated, polarized sects with conflicting interests. Each of these polarized sects may then begin to use whatever force and influence it possesses to extract what it views as rightly theirs or to stop what it views as threats to its interests. Such a scenario may end in widespread civil conflict as has happened and continues to happen in many countries, some not so far from Egypt.
2. Sectarian violence is one of the most serious problems that can face any society — and which has struck Egypt — because this type of violence strikes society at its roots and propels it towards fragmentation. As such, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) stresses that addressing the issue of sectarian violence requires political will, an awareness of the danger, hard work, cooperation among all state authorities and the effective participation of civil society to elaborate short-, medium- and long-term plans to address and ultimately eradicate it.
3. Many state officials, security officers and legislators deny the existence of sectarian violence in Egypt. This is the first problem that the Egyptian state must overcome: denial. Others minimize the extent of the problem. This is another problem: disregard. Yet others believe that it is a security problem that requires the application of the ongoing state of emergency. This is a third problem: shortsightedness. A fourth group of officials believes that sectarian violence is the problem of one state authority instead of all of them. This problem requires accountability, for it is shirking responsibility.
4. The EIPR has worked to document most instances of sectarian violence since the beginning of 2008 as part of a larger effort to monitor and document developments relevant to freedom of religion and belief in Egypt. This was prompted by a realization of the seriousness of the issue, and the risks it poses to society, as well as EIPR's desire to reach a deeper understanding of the current state of religious tensions in Egypt and their causes in order to confront this danger. Motivated by a sense of social responsibility, the EIPR presents this study to all public officials and

citizens, in the hope that they will realize the gravity of the situation and take proactive steps to change it and eliminate the manifestations of a sectarian society. Ultimately, the EIPR hopes that Egypt can become a healthy society comprised of individuals and groups of different faiths, all of whom believe in difference and diversity, and particularly religious diversity; a society in which rights and freedoms are respected for all citizens without discrimination.

### **Summary and Methodology**

5. This study offers a summary of all incidents of sectarian violence or tension documented by the EIPR's Freedom of Religion and Belief Program in Egypt from January 2008 to January 2010. It offers a brief analysis of these events including their nature, locations, times, duration, proximate causes and the state agencies' responses. This study concluded by presenting several recommendations to Egyptian state agencies to begin to confront the issue. An appendix to the study contains graphs and tables showing the chronological and geographic spread of instances of sectarian violence since 2008.
6. In preparing this study, the EIPR relied on the findings of field missions, research and media monitoring undertaken by the Freedom of Religion and Belief Program since 2008. The analysis here is based on documented information published by the EIPR in eight reports over two years, at a rate of one every three months, titled Freedom of Religion and Belief in Egypt: Quarterly Report, as well as the report of a fact-finding mission to Naga Hammadi in January 2010, titled 'Naga Hammadi: Witnesses to the Strife.'
7. In documenting and monitoring such incidents, the EIPR considers a case of sectarian violence to be: any use of violence, regardless of degree or type, by an individual or group affiliated with one religion against an individual or group not affiliated with that religion, or against their property or houses of worship, if religious affiliation was one of the motives of violence or a factor in the escalation of violence, or if such violence included attacks on religious practices, places of worship or religious symbols.

## **Two years of sectarian violence: What happened?**

8. From January 2008 to January 2010, there have been at least **53 incidents** of sectarian violence or tension—about two incidents a month—that have taken place **in 17 of Egypt's 29 governorates**. In some governorates, such as Sharqiya, only one incident has taken place, but in others, such as Minya, there have been 21 incidents.
9. Due to the nature Egypt's demographic composition — the conversion of most of the population to Islam with the persistence of a significant Christian minority — sectarian violence always takes place between Muslims and Christians, although in the period under review there was one case of sectarian violence by Muslims against Egyptian Baha'is.

## **The geographic spread of violence**

10. The majority of incidents of sectarian violence took place in **Upper Egypt**, specifically in the governorates of Beni Soueif, Minya, Assyout, Sohag, Qena, Luxor and Fayyout. This set of governorates is also the most serious, in terms of the number of incidents (33), their severity (for example six Christians and one Muslim in their company were killed and nine other Christians injured in Naga Hammadi, located in the Qena governorate, on 6 January 2010) and the number of people involved (at times as many as 2,000, as was the case in attacks in the city of Dayrout, located in Assyout, on 24 October 2009).
11. The incidents in Upper Egypt are also the most serious in view of the broad geographic scope covered by single incidents, their relatively long duration and the losses resulting. An example is events that took place in Qena in the districts of Farshout and Abu Tisht and several adjacent villages. These lasted for five days, from 19 to 23 November 2009, and losses, according to victims, were estimated at more than LE4 million. Sectarian violence in Upper Egypt is also notable for the frequency with which it occurs, the variety of cases and the disparate locations. **In Minya, for example, there has been an instance of sectarian violence every 35 days in 17 different villages located in seven of the governorate's nine districts.**
12. Following behind was **Lower Egypt and the Delta** (Qalyoubiya, Monufiya, Dakahliya, Sharqiya, Gharbiya, Kafr al-Sheikh and Beheira, as well as Cairo, Giza and Alexandria), **with 20 incidents**. In this group, the site of the most violence was Dakahliya, where three separate incidents took place in February, June and August 2009; these incidents involved hundreds of people and led to serious material losses. Next in importance was the governorate of Monufiya, where one serious incident took place in which a Muslim killed one Christian and attempted to kill two others on 17 September 2009. The gravest incident in this set was the Zeitoun

bombing in Cairo on 10 May 2009. Although there were no casualties, injuries, losses or damage to the Zeitoun diocese building, the fact that the bishopric was targeted with local explosives is extremely worrying.

13. The final geographic set includes the remaining 12 governorates, including all the border provinces (Matrouh, New Valley, Aswan, Red Sea, North and South Sinai), the three Canal governorates (Suez, Ismailiya and Port Said), the two new governorates in the Greater Cairo area (Helwan and October) and the coastal governorate of Damietta. EIPR researchers documented no cases of sectarian violence or tension in these areas in the period under review.<sup>1</sup>
  
14. Towns, villages and hamlets are the most common sites of sectarian violence, followed by provincial cities and then provincial capitals. A not insignificant number of incidents took place on Fridays, specifically after the Friday prayer, as well as on Sundays. **Most of those involved were young men and male teenagers,** followed by older men, and then women in a small percentage of cases.

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<sup>1</sup> During the writing of this report, on 12 March 2010, sectarian clashes took place in the Matrouh governorate for the first time.

## Types of Sectarian Violence

15. The types of violence or tension and its repercussions varied, but there are two types of incidents that account for the largest percentage of cases, and these are, in fact, the most serious types. **The first is acts of collective retribution** that target adherents of a particular religion in one area. Given the demographic makeup of Egyptian society, the vast majority of these involve Muslims attacking Christians. These attacks spring from an irrational conviction that all Christians in the area are responsible for an act attributed to one or more Christians towards one or more Muslims, and it is believed that all Muslims in the area have a responsibility to take revenge for that act, regardless of the relationship any of the assailants or victims may have to the original act. Acts of collective retribution are linked to two notions that are extremely apparent in the period under review: the ‘dignity and standing of Muslims’ and the ‘honor’ of Muslims. Retribution by Christians against Muslims is not unheard of, but it is much less frequent and severe. When angry, Christians tend to turn to protests, sit-ins and demonstrations, and they invariably turn to the church to seek its intervention on their behalf.
16. **The second most common type of violence is prompted by Christians engaging in their religious rites**, for example, Christians praying, trying to hold worship services in a home or building, trying to turn a building into a church, or building a new church or expanding an existing one. This type of violence is not linked with a particular place or governorate, but has taken place all over Egypt, from Alexandria to Sharqiya and from Cairo to Beni Soueif and Minya.
17. Objections to Christian worship have not come only from Muslim citizens, but from state officials as well. **On more than one occasion, state representatives have refused to allow a group of Christians to worship in a home or have arrested and questioned those who do so. In many cases, state representatives’ refusal has prompted Muslim citizens to declare their refusal as well, as a result of their sense of alignment with the state.** We also documented cases in which police officers were involved in inciting against the construction of a Christian place of worship in a particular place. In all of the cases we observed, the security services would close the building used for prayer services “without a permit” and place a permanent guard on it or the home in which prayer services had taken place to guarantee that no such thing took place again.
18. In several cases, Christians were prevented from building or completing construction on a home or other building on their private land because the security services suspected that they intended to turn the structure into a church or sell it to the bishopric. In some cases, Christians were prohibited from renovating an

existing, licensed church by state officials, and were even asked to remove crosses from the church.

19. In addition to the two most common types of sectarian violence noted above, there are two other types that are less prevalent: **targeting churches**, seen in the period under review in the form of planting explosives next to them, torching them or breaking crosses off them during the night; and **premeditated murder on the basis of religious identity**. Citizens' possession of firearms, and even automatic weapons, has contributed to the gravity of the outcome of such crimes, but even a lack of firearms does not prevent such crimes being committed with knives.
  
20. One cannot ignore the fact that Christians' economic interests have been targeted in most incidents of sectarian violence. Although Egyptian law considers the burning of homes or property to be a crime punishable by up to life in prison, torching homes during sectarian violence has become so common as to be routine, and assailants engage in arson without the slightest regard for the law and its deterrent penalties. Other movable property, agricultural land, and commercial and industrial facilities have also been vandalized. Indeed, this has happened so often and the cases are so similar that many Christian victims who spoke to the EIPR have come to believe that they have been targeted economically to impoverish them or drive them out of the country.
  
21. The spread of rumors plays an influential role in sectarian clashes and is a contributing factor to escalating the attacks and their repercussions. In the violence that followed the shooting of Christians in Naga Hammadi in January 2010, rumors had it that Christians had burned down a mosque and a Christian had killed a Muslim. Because of the repeated occurrence of rumors and their utmost seriousness, the EIPR concluded in its report, *Witnesses to the Strife*, that any comprehensive investigation into the events should include ascertaining the source of the rumors and identifying those responsible for their spread.
  
22. The following section of this study provides further details on the major types of sectarian violence, with examples of each one.

### **Collective retribution for affronts to the dignity or honor of Muslims**

23. There are several reasons to consider collective retribution one of the gravest forms of sectarian violence, among them that it cannot be predicted but may flare up with any incident at all, no matter how trivial. In addition, attacks in sectarian retributions are invariably extremely violent, and they spread quickly to neighboring villages. This type of violence has undergone very serious developments in the period under review, on several levels: it has expanded geographically, seen the involvement of more citizens and lasted longer than other types. Any number of acts may prompt this kind of violence, and there are often heavy losses and several victims.
24. The retribution is no longer limited to the village or town in which the purported offense took place; in late 2009 and early 2010, there were instances of this type of violence spreading to more than village and even more than one district in the same governorate. The act that some Muslims believe requires vengeance against Christians (qua Christians) may be a Muslim murdered by a Christian, a Christian accused of raping a Muslim, a romantic or consensual sexual relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman or the disappearance of a Christian woman who had converted to Islam. In some cases, the original action may involve a Christian child fighting with a Muslim child.
25. The EIPR most fears that one day acts of vengeance following a single incident, regardless of how serious or trivial it may be, will spread across an entire governorate or more than one governorate. Some may think this far-fetched, but the expanding geographic scope of this type of violence suggests a worrying trend: from revenge focused in one village, the violence began to encompass several villages and then several districts; where once revenge was expected after a murder, it has now become a “duty” following a fight between two children of different religions.
26. **Farshout, 18 November 2009:** a Muslim family in the village of al-Shaqifi, located in the district of Abu Tisht in Qena, accused a Christian youth from Kom al-Ahmar, located in the Farshout district of the same governorate, of raping their young daughter. Although the family reported the incident and the police arrested the suspect the same day, an ambient belief suddenly took hold that “the honor of Muslims” was at stake and the Muslims in the area and neighboring villages were obliged to take revenge against any Christian and punish him simply because he shared the suspect’s religion. On Friday, 20 November, the security services ordered 15 Christian families in the village of Kom al-Ahmar to leave the village immediately in fear of their lives. At dawn on Saturday, 21 November, fires broke

out in three Christian-owned stores in Farshout at about 2:30 am. Thousands of Muslims from al-Shaqifi and surrounding villages assembled in front of the Farshout police station and then began attacking Christian-owned property, breaking into shops, looting them and setting them on fire. The violence then spread, and several other villages in the Farshout district witnessed attacks on Christian-owned property, including a fire set in a pharmacy in the village of al-Qara at dawn on Sunday, 22 November. Clashes took place between Muslims and Christians in the village of al-Araki the same evening. In the village of al-Qabibi, the courtyard of a Christian was torched, but there were no losses. The violence then spread to Abu Shousha, located in the neighboring district of Abu Tisht, about 30 km from al-Shaqifi. Fires were set in a pharmacy and three Christian-owned shops at dawn on 23 November, according to Father Boulos Nazir, the pastor at the Abu Shousha church. On the afternoon of the same day a group of Muslims torched the houses, shops and property of Christians in the village of Kom al-Ahmar.

27. **Other incidents:** Qena was not the only governorate where acts of collective retribution took place. Similar events occurred in the province of Dakahliya on 29 June 2009 in Kafr al-Barbari after a Christian killed a Muslim in a dispute over the price of a soda. In Dayrout in the governorate of Assyout on 24 October 2009 the same thing happened after a video clip was circulated showing consensual sex between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. Fayyoun also saw retributive violence in al-Nazla in the district of Youssef al-Siddiq on 20 June 2008, following the disappearance of a young woman who had converted to Islam and married a Muslim. Local Muslims believed she had been kidnapped by her Christian family, after which hundreds of village Muslims gathered to wreak vengeance on their Christian neighbors. Several Coptic-owned shops in the village were looted and vandalized, homes were broken into and looted, some homes and shops were torched and a car was vandalized. In addition, the facade of the village church was damaged by rocks, along with the car of the church priest.
28. Minya was the site of most incidents of collective retribution, although they were less violent. There were incidents in which a trivial dispute between a Muslim and Christian—over who has the right of way, for example—devolved into sectarian confrontations in which religious slogans were chanted and Muslims and Christians threw stones at one another. This is bolstered by the belief that everyone is responsible for the defense of their coreligionists.
29. The Naga Hammadi attack and the subsequent violent sectarian attacks in Qena was the worst case of collective, random retribution against Christians in the period under review. On 6 January 2010, six Christians and a Muslim in their

company were killed and nine Christians injured by Muslims simply because the victims belonged to the same religion as an accused rapist. Despite some doubts amongst most local copts about this, the official story, the incident is significant and cause for grave concern.

30. As noted above, rumors play an important role in inflaming antagonistic sentiments in many cases. In Saft al-Laban, located in the Boulaq al-Dakrour district of Giza, rumors spread that Christians had burned an area mosque after a fight between Christians and Muslims sparked by the harassment of a Christian girl on 13 May 2009. As a result of the rumor, more Muslims gathered and the two sides exchanged gunfire. Similarly, in the Dayrout incident of 24 October 2009 rumors were spread that a gang of Christians were filming Muslim girls in sexually compromised situations to offend Muslims, and a flyer was distributed calling for “revenge against Christians for their act and support for Islam.” The same happened in the events of Naga Hammadi in January 2010, where several rumors spread on Friday, 8 January, markedly fanning the flames of the violence. That Friday was the funeral procession for the Muslim policeman who was killed in the attacks on 6 January, but a rumor quickly spread that it was a funeral for a Muslim killed by Copts in revenge. Another prominent — and false — rumor was that Copts had burned down a mosque; this rumor began on Christmas Day and spread quickly. Other rumors about two Muslims shot by armed Christians were also proved false.
31. Disorganized, random movement may be the general impression that one has of sectarian violence, but in some cases the EIPR has observed that the violence assumes an organized form with specific targets. This was the case in al-Nazla in the district of Youssef al-Siddiq in Fayyoun on 20 June 2008. Testimonies gathered by EIPR researchers stated that the assailants moved in organized groups as they entered Christian homes and intentionally removed residents and did not harm them, targeting property instead and terrorizing them by breaking valuables and Christian icons. The statements said that the group would leave a house at the same time after hearing a call to stop, after which they would move to the next house.
32. Although friendships and romantic relationships between young Muslim men and woman may be taken as some indication of the flexibility of relations between adherents of the two religions, these relationships are still resisted (and sometimes violently) because many are no longer able to understand or accept them, particularly the adherents of the same faith as the female party in the relationship. When religious bigotry blends with patriarchal attitudes and tribalism, vengeance may be taken against the man’s coreligionists. Sectarian clashes can take place in

these cases where participants have no links at all with the parties to the relationship except that they are adherents of a certain religion. In the period under review, several cases of sectarian clashes took place because of a friendship or romantic relationship between a Muslim man and Christian woman or vice-versa.

### **Prohibited worship**

33. The period under review witnessed several cases of sectarian violence connected to Christians holding a prayer service in a building or a home. In Alexandria, hundreds of Muslims in the village of al-Iraq in the district of al-Amiriya assembled outside the home of a Copt on 25 December 2008 to oppose his intention to turn a building constructed on his private land into a church that would serve the approximately 80 Coptic families in the area. The families had wanted to use the structure as a place for prayer services and religious lessons since the nearest church was 50 km away in the area of King Maryout. In Kafr Farag Girgis, located in the district of Minya al-Qamh in Sharqiya, hundreds of Muslims assembled on the evening of 10 December 2008 to protest village Copts, who number some 1,500, holding a prayer service in the new services building. Cairo was not exempt from this sort of rejection of Christian worship either: in Ain Shams hundreds of Muslims gathered outside a church services building on 23 November 2008, where a prayer service was slated to be held inside the building on the same day. Those gathered began chanting anti-Christian slogans and some threw stones at the building, breaking its windows.
34. Similar and more incidents took place in the governorate of Beni Soueif: in less than 24 days three cases of sectarian violence occurred related to Christians constructing buildings for prayer services. On 21 June 2009 in Izbat Bushra al-Sharqiya, located in the Fashn district, Christians in the village, which has no place for prayer service, tried to hold a service in a building owned by the Biba, al-Fashin and Somosta bishopric. They received orders from State Security Investigations officers not to pray in the building, but they insisted on their right to worship, after which clashes between Muslims and Christians erupted. Several statements indicated that security personnel were involved in inciting Muslims to demand the closure of the building. Less than two weeks later, the same thing happened in the neighboring Izbat Girgis, on 3 July 2009, when Christians held a prayer service in a building in the town. There the attack also took place after orders came from State Security closing the building. Indeed, **one policeman was involved in the assaults on local Christians**. In a different district of the same governorate — the Biba district, in the village of al-Fuqa'i — immediately after the Friday prayer on 17 July 2009, some 2,000 village Muslims attacked a building owned by the Christian Love

Association along with the homes of several Christians, following rumors that Christians intended to turn the association building into a church.

35. Minya, the site of the largest percentage of sectarian violence, witnessed similar attacks. On 24 July 2009, in the village of al-Howaissla, located in the district of Minya, some 2,000 village Muslims attacked and torched a building owned by the Independent Baptist Assembly. They also set fire to three Christian-owned homes and a livestock pen and chanted anti-Christian slogans. The attacks took place after Muslims discovered that the assembly intended to turn the building into a church when it affixed two plaster crosses on the building facade. In Nazlat al-Badraman, located in the Deir Mawas district of Minya, there were sectarian clashes between Muslims and Christians on 27 October 2009 following Muslim protests against the renovation of the bell tower of the local Mar Girgis Church. The church windows were broken and some homes and property of Christians in the village were damaged, among them five cars, a cement warehouse and a sawmill. The contents of a private car were also stolen.
  
36. One of the oddest things observed by the EIPR was the Public Prosecutor's questioning of a citizen on charges of hosting a group prayer in his home "without a permit" — a charge that the EIPR found had no legal basis. On 2 April 2009, a citizen was arrested because he had hosted a benediction service in his home, attended by his relatives. He was taken before the Samalout prosecutor in Minya for questioning on charges of "engaging in religious rites at home without a permit."
  
37. The period under review also saw several cases in which security authorities intervened to prevent Christians from building houses or properties. Security forces also forced them to sign an affidavit that the building would not be used for worship services and pledge that they would not sell it to the church. In the village of al-Reida, located in the Minya district, a Christian lumber merchant was prohibited from completing construction on a lumber warehouse on 28 July 2009 because State Security Investigations officers suspected that he was building a church. On 15 August 2009, a priest in Izbat Dawoud, located in the Samalout district of Minya, sent a complaint to the President and several human rights organizations against State Security Investigations officers and the governor of Minya. He asked that Christians in the village — 800 in all — be allowed to turn a building into a reception hall to host weddings and funerals instead of holding such ceremonies in the street.
  
38. On 31 August 2009, security prevented a citizen from building a wall around a piece of land he owns in the village of Beni Hilal, located in al-Qusiya in Assyout,

because State Security Investigations officers suspected that he was building a church. On 16 September 2009, a house under construction was demolished in the village of al-Qiyat, located in the city of al-Adwa in Minya, because officers at the al-Adwa police station suspected that the owner of the house was converting it into a church. This was after he had signed an affidavit saying that he would not build a church or sell the building to the bishopric.

39. On 1 April 2009, security agencies prevented Copts of Izbat Wassef Ghali Pasha, located in the al-Ayyat district of October governorate, from praying over the body of a Christian woman in a building owned by the Giza bishopric, fearing it would be converted into a church. In April of 2009 as well, police with the Samalout station in the Minya governorate shut down a house of worship operated by the evangelical community in the village of Sabaa; Christians in the village had been praying in the building since December 2008.

40. Despite Presidential Decree 391/2005, which allows church renovations to proceed upon notification of the authorities, with no need for prior approval, the security agencies have suspended renovations to churches that have indeed received renovation permits. On 13 July 2008, State Security Investigations officers ordered a suspension of renovations on the Archangel Michael Church in Huw, located in the Naga Hammadi district of Qena. On 17 August 2008, three women were struck by a police representative after they tried to take some sand into the church of the village of Deshasha, located in the Somosta district of Beni Soueif, to repair a floor that had cracked because water had pooled underneath it. In January 2008, security officers in the governorate of Beni Soueif suspended renovations to the Mar Mina Church in Wish al-Bab, located in the Ahnasiya district. The attachment of a wooden cross at the entrance to the Church of the Virgin in Assyout even required the intervention of the assistant minister of interior for the governorate, who asked that the cross be removed because it “provokes Muslims.” The cross was not removed, but the church agreed not to use electric lights to illuminate it.

### **Houses of worship targeted**

41. Nearly no case of sectarian violence passes without a church being pelted with stones or an attempt to burn it down, accompanied by hostile religious slogans. But there is another type of attack that specifically targets churches, seen, for example, in the Zeitoun area of Cairo when a bomb went off on the evening of 10 May 2009 in front of the Zeitoun Coptic bishopric. Another example of this was the burning of the Abaskheroun al-Qallini Church in Izbet Basilius, located in the Bani Mazar district of Minya on 11 July 2009, in which local Christians and Muslims accused one another of committing the crime. A fire, seemingly set intentionally, also broke out in the St. Mark's Church in the district of Sanouras in Fayyoun on 1 December 2009. Two crosses at the top of the Martyr Abu Fam al-Gindi Church, located in the Tama district of Sohag, were broken on 10 October 2009 by unknown assailants, and an ancient church run by the Greek Orthodox confession in Rosetta in the Al-Beheira governorate was demolished by some 40 people led by a judge and his two sons (who are chief prosecutors) on 19 September 2008. The Deir Abu Fana monastery, run by Orthodox Copts and located in the Mallawi district of Minya, came under attack on 9 January 2008 by some 20 armed assailants and left eight monks' cells damaged. On 31 May 2008, monks in the same monastery suffered another armed attack by nearly 60 Bedouins living in the village of Qasr Hour, adjacent to the monastery. The attack was occasioned by a years-long land dispute between the monks at the ancient monastery, who are reclaiming the land around the monastery, and the Muslim Bedouins in the adjacent village, who consider the land theirs by virtue of squatters' rights; the land is state-owned. Although the conflict did not start for religious reasons, the violence directed at the monastery's monks revealed dangerous and unprecedented sectarian aspects, from vandalizing the monks' church and destroying the bibles found inside it, to kidnapping the monks and torturing them and insulting their religious beliefs though forcing them to spit on the crucifix and repeat the *shahaada* indicating their conversion to Islam.

### **Murder on the basis of religious identity**

42. Murder is another form of sectarian violence in which the victims are chosen because of their religious identity. In one case that took place on 17 September 2009 in the district of Bagour in the Monufiya governorate, one Christian was killed and three others gravely injured by an assailant who repeated "You infidels, you Nazarenes," and "I'm going to kill them all." The investigation in the case is still pending and the defendant is currently before review at the Abbasiya Mental Hospital to assess his mental capacity. In Naga Hammadi, three Muslims plotted to kill as many Christians as possible; they killed six Christians and one Muslim in their company and injured nine other Christians on 6 January 2010. According to investigations by the Public Prosecutor, the reason for the murder was that the victims belonged to the religion of a man who had been accused of raping a

Muslim girl child. In the Amiriya district of Cairo on 6 October 2008, a Christian whose sister had converted to Islam and married a Muslim, shot and killed his sister's husband with an automatic weapon and injured his sister and niece with the aid of his uncle.

43. On 27 September 2009, hundreds of Christians from the village of Dalga, located in the Deir Mawas district of Minya, demonstrated to protest the death of two local Christians and the injury of three more in a fight with Muslims. Although there was no strong evidence that the victims were killed for religious reasons, the number of deaths in a short period (August and September 2009) made Christians feel that they were being targeted. Demonstrators even carried signs saying, "Who's next?" The village of Dafash also saw a demonstration by hundreds of Copts on 5 June 2008 in front of a church after a Coptic youth in the village was killed the same day. A local Muslim had stabbed the young man in a field in revenge for allegedly spying on the home of his brother and sister-in-law. On 5 October 2008, a Minya criminal court sentenced the killer to one year in prison with a suspended sentence. Another Christian was killed during sectarian clashes in the village of al-Tayyiba, located in the Samalout district of Minya, in October 2008; the court acquitted the defendant of the murder on 4 May 2009.

## How does the state address sectarian violence?

44. It is clear that at this point the state does not have a plan for confronting the growing sectarian violence in the country or addressing sectarian tensions, primarily because, until recently, the state strenuously denied the very existence of violence or tension. Nothing is more indicative of this than statements made by the Governor of Minya to *al-Watani al-Youm*, the mouthpiece of the ruling National Democratic Party, on 24 November 2009. Speaking to the paper, he denied any instances of sectarian violence in his governorate, which is, in fact, the site of the largest percentage of cases in Egypt, as noted above.
45. In the period under review, the state viewed sectarian violence as purely an issue of security. As such, it wholly failed to deal with the problem, viewing it as a series of isolated events in the absence of any comprehensive understanding of its causes, manifestations or solutions. It falls to the Ministry of Interior, specifically the State Security Investigations, to deal with each incident, and we can briefly describe the ministry's interventions as **inadequate, violent, shortsighted and, in most cases, illegal**. Its actions are always intended to impose calm by force: it is either reconciliation and quiet or arrest and at times the collective punishment of the victims themselves.
46. In a very few cases, non-security, executive officials, such as governors, have intervened to address incidents of sectarian violence in their governorates, but these interventions are always weak and ineffective. As for the remainder of state ministries, they normally distance themselves from sectarian violence and tension, as if it has nothing to do with them, and leave it to security to deal with all parties involved, from the victims and perpetrators to their relatives, area notables and the church, which plays an important role, both positive and negative, following such events. Occasionally MPs or members of municipal councils intervene, but virtually always to aid the security establishment in imposing order and calm rather than apply the law to bring the perpetrators to justice.
47. The judiciary, particularly sitting judges, does not often hear cases of sectarian violence, and it is extremely rare for such crimes to be referred to trial. On the other hand, the Public Prosecutor's role in dealing with the violence is shameful: although Egyptian law gives that office the prerogatives of investigating judges authorized to conduct immediate, independent investigations to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice using evidence of their crimes to protect society from lawbreakers, the Public Prosecutor's Office tends to aid the security establishment in imposing "reconciliation" procedures, even when these are against the law—for example, accepting reconciliation in felonies, which is not permitted by Egyptian

law. At other times the Public Prosecutor conducts investigations for show that lack all evidence, which means that either the perpetrators are not identified or they are acquitted if they are referred to trial. As such, impunity is the norm for most crimes of sectarian violence.

### **Role of security agencies: Quiet at the expense of Justice**

48. **Imposing quiet** is the goal of the Ministry of Interior in all incidents of sectarian violence, and this is often done against the will of the parties involved in the clashes. In order to achieve this goal, the Interior Ministry often takes a series of routine—and illegal—measures. Sectarian violence often ends in a reconciliation meeting sponsored by the Interior Ministry and brought about by the use of all means of pressure it possesses, both legitimate and illegitimate. The end objective is to restore the situation to the status quo, as if nothing has happened.
49. The direct intervention of the Interior Ministry—which can be rapid in some cases or take hours in others—usually involves the use of **excessive violence by police forces** to disperse crowds, even when they are peacefully assembling and even if they are assemblies organized by victims protesting assaults on them. Indeed, EIPR researchers have documented cases in which policemen themselves are involved in violence against Christians and attacks on their property. Such was the case in the events in Izbat Bushra al-Sharqiya, located in the Fashn district of Beni Soueif, on 21 June 2009. A number of testimonies collected and corroborated by EIPR researchers stated that security personnel were involved in breaking into Christian homes and smashing their property. In Saft al-Laban, in the Boulaq al-Dakroul area of Giza, on 13 May 2009, some victims said that policemen were vandalizing the property of Christians while arresting them inside their homes.
50. In cases of sectarian violence, the police are unable and sometimes unwilling to **intervene to protect the homes and property of Copts**, particularly in attacks that take the form of collective retribution and involve large numbers of Muslims. In some cases this may be due to the fact that the assailants outnumber security forces, making the latter fearful of engaging them and risking losses in their own ranks. A clear example of the inability or unwillingness to engage is seen in the violence that took place in Dayrout in the Assiout governorate on 24 October 2009. In that case, the violence began at 10:30 am and security forces refrained from intervening until 3 pm, leaving Muslims free for five hours to attack five churches and numerous pharmacies and shops. The same happened in Shouraniya, located in the Maragha district of Sohag, from 28 to 31 March 2009, when local Muslims attacked the homes and property of their Egyptian Baha'i neighbors. As a result of police inaction, five

Baha'i-owned homes were burned nearly to the ground. This has been repeated in several other instances of sectarian violence.

51. **Arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention and administrative detention** under the provisions of the State of Emergency in place since 1981 often accompany incidents of sectarian violence, and police engage in these acts with no regard to whether their targets are victims or perpetrators of the violence. Indeed, usually the Interior Ministry takes care to arrest roughly the same number of Muslims and Christians. People are detained with the goal of imposing order and calm, which is effected by using detainees as hostages or a means to pressure their relatives into renouncing their rights and participating in customary reconciliation procedures, sponsored by the Ministry of Interior. At other times, arrests are used to punish those involved in the violence, with no regard for courts or legal considerations.
  
52. At times, arbitrary arrests are not sufficient to restore calm and so the Interior Ministry imposes a curfew in the affected area. At other times, it engages in **collective punishment** of villagers by using bodies such as the Electricity Police, Environmental Police, Supply Police or Tax Authority, which hand out tickets and levy fines to bring residents of a particular area under control. This happened in September 2008 in the Christian-majority village of Dafash, located in the Samalout district of Minya.
  
53. **Forced displacement**, which is not legal under Egyptian law in any situation, has been used repeatedly over the last two years. In most cases, the Interior Ministry forcibly expels residents from their homes to mollify Muslims in the affected area and impose calm, and in most cases the removal is final or open-ended and based on oral directives from State Security officers. This was the case with five Baha'i families displaced from their homes in Shouraniya in the governorate of Sohag; removed on 31 March 2009, they have not been allowed to return to their homes as of the writing of this report. Father Ishaq Qastour from Izbat Bushra al-Sharqiya, located in the Fashin district of Beni Soueif, was expelled on 29 June 2009, after the violence in the village on 21 June. A Christian teacher, his wife and their three children were forcibly moved from Abu al-Matamir in the Beheira governorate to another governorate in April 2008 after rumors spread that he was encouraging his female students to convert to Christianity. In other cases, the displacement has been short term. For example, five Christians from the Sidi Salem district of Beni Soueif were expelled for three months from mid-October 2008 to early January 2009.
  
54. To restore calm to areas affected by sectarian tensions, the Interior Ministry routinely convenes **customary reconciliation meetings** as an alternative to the justice system and compensation, rather than a supplement to the criminal justice system. In most

cases, reconciliation involves victims withdrawing any complaints and signing an affidavit of this withdrawal before the Public Prosecutor or having it notarized at the Notary Office and submitting it to the prosecutor. During reconciliation meetings, the parties also pledge not to file lawsuits, including civil suits for compensation. While these reconciliations fail to address the causes of the violence on any level, they also assure the assailants that if they repeat their actions, they will not be required to pay compensation for damages and will face no criminal charges; at the very most, they will be forced to orally apologize. This encourages assailants to repeat their actions, with the indirect support of the Interior Ministry.

55. In very rare cases, reconciliation meetings end with an agreement to compensate the victims. EIPR researchers have documented this in only 2 of the 53 instances of sectarian violence in the period under review: for Copts who sustained damages in the attacks in al-Nazla in Fayyoun in 2008 (compensation costs were shared by the church and the governorate) and for Copts who sustained damages in the Farshout attacks in Qena in 2009 (costs were shared by the Ministry for Administrative Development and the Pharmacists Syndicate in the governorate).

### **No punishment for sectarian violence**

56. It is an established pattern that the judiciary does not hear cases involving sectarian violence. Initially the security apparatus attempts to prevent the incident from reaching the Public Prosecutor's Office for investigation, bargaining with and pressuring the parties involved to seek reconciliation at the police station. If the incident is so grave that it cannot be concealed, the security services allow it to be brought before a prosecutor, who opens an investigation at the same time that security redoubles its efforts to pressure the assailants, victims and their families to end the investigation and reconcile. For example, following the attacks on the Abu Fana Monastery, located in Mallawi in the Minya governorate, on 31 May 2008, police arrested two Muslims and two Christians. They remained under administrative detention for more than a year, until reconciliation and until witnesses and the victims changed their statements to the Public Prosecutor in July 2009; after the reconciliation the four 'hostages' were released in mid-August 2009.
57. Investigations by the prosecutor's office are often marred by grave legal irregularities—for example, accepting reconciliation in felony cases, which is illegal. This includes in cases in which Christian homes or industrial or commercial facilities are torched; these are felonies for which the law does not allow the victim to renounce his claim. Similarly, although the Egyptian Penal Code grants special protection to houses of worship from vandalism or destruction—Article 160 sets a specific punishment for this crime, which cannot be the subject of reconciliation—

this article is not applied to those who vandalize a church. Many of the violent sectarian crimes in Egypt over the last two years have targeted churches, inflicted damage on them and have at times involved attempts to torch them. Nevertheless, the EIPR documented no prosecution of any person on this charge. On 20 June 2008, hundreds of Muslims in the village of al-Nazla, located in the Youssef al-Siddiq district of Fayyoun, attacked the homes and property of village Copts, as well as damaging the facade of the village church with stones and vandalizing the car of the church priest; the security apparatus convened a reconciliation meeting between the two parties on 1 July 2008 and no case was referred to court. The same thing occurred in the assault on the Abu Fana Monastery and its church, noted above.

58. In many crimes of sectarian violence, investigators with the Public Prosecutor fail to identify the perpetrators, a failure attributable to either their poor capacities as investigators or their unwillingness to find the perpetrators. As of the release of this report, the Public Prosecutor's Office has failed to identify any of those involved in the large-scale attacks on Christians in the districts of Farshout and Abu Tisht in Qena, which began on 19 November and lasted until 23 November, and during which numerous people attacked Christian-owned shops, pharmacies, cars, homes and fields. The same is true of the violence in Shouraniya, located in the Maragha district of Sohag, on 31 March 2009: more than a year later, investigators have failed to identify those responsible for torching the homes and property of Baha'is and bring them to justice.
59. Of the crimes of sectarian violence documented by the EIPR over the last two years in Minya, exactly zero have been referred to trial. Virtually the same situation obtains in all other governorates that were the scene of violence. In the very few cases that are brought before the courts, investigators have not done sufficient work to identify the perpetrators; in addition, proper legal procedures are not followed and insufficient evidence is presented to the court. The result is acquittal. In the case of the large-scale sectarian attacks in Dayrout in Assyout on 24 October, which targeted three churches, the Coptic diocese building and Christian property including pharmacies, shops, cars and homes, a court headed by Judge Khaled Mustafa handed down an acquittal for all defendants on 13 December 2009.
60. The repeated closure of cases involving sectarian violence, the choice of reconciliation over prosecution (even in cases where this is illegal) and the acquittals issued for all such crimes have made impunity the rule in these crimes. As a result, sectarian violence and the ensuing losses had increased by late 2009 and early 2010. In short, assailants feel a sense of victory twice: once when they are able to carry out their criminal assaults against a weaker party and again when the state stands beside them and protects them from any punishment for their actions. By the same token,

this impunity leaves victims feeling like strangers and second-class citizens in their own country. First they are attacked simply because they are Christians and then the state does not bring them justice; it does not even stand by as a neutral party, but chooses to stand with the assailants against them.

### **Where does the solution begin?**

#### ***The first step: acknowledging the problem***

61. On the Prophet's birthday on 28 February 2010, the President gave his annual speech to mark the occasion, but in this speech he said that the state "will bear its responsibility to apply those provisions of the Constitution related to citizenship and the equal rights and duties of citizens, without discrimination." He called on civil society, religious scholars and clerics and intellectuals to do their part to strengthen these concepts and disseminate the values, principles, culture and practice of citizenship. The speech discussed the "urgent need" for efforts by clerics, educational and cultural institutions, publishing houses and the media "to confront **the dangers of division, extremism and sectarian incitement,**" saying, "We in Egypt are fully aware of these dangers."
62. A few days after events in Naga Hammadi in January 2010, the President gave a speech to mark Science Day. In the speech he noted, "Thinking people, preachers, intellectuals and media workers all bear a great responsibility to contain **strife, ignorance and blind bigotry, and confront the repulsive sectarian tendencies that threaten the unity of our society and the cohesion of our people.**"
63. From the two address it is apparent that state officials—indeed, the head of state—have finally begun to recognize the dangers of sectarian tension and admit that we have a problem. This is the first step towards a solution, but this change in discourse will have little impact if it is not translated into a clear agenda to solve the problem and address its root causes and manifestations. There is no way to do this but by respect for human rights and basic liberties and guaranteeing these to all citizens without discrimination.

#### ***Before we begin: towards a comprehensive approach to address sectarianism***

64. The EIPR reiterates that any attempts to resolve the growing problem of sectarian violence in Egypt must proceed from a realization of several linked, equally important facts: 1) addressing sectarian violence must take place within a larger framework that addresses other violations of the right to freedom of religion and

belief in Egypt; 2) addressing religious freedom cannot succeed if it is not part of a new policy of respect for the human rights and constitutional liberties of all Egyptian citizens and residents within a democratic framework that respects the rule of law, believes in the role of civil society and addresses all aspects of economic, social and political injustice directed against any Egyptian without exception; and 3) the Constitution and international conventions ratified by Egypt contain the normative and legal framework needed to move towards a solution. The only thing missing is a full recognition of the gravity of the problem and the speedy move towards methods to deal with it.

65. The EIPR also realizes that any attempt to reach a solution must begin with an exhaustive examination of sectarianism, in theory and in Egypt, to understand the historical and substantive roots of sectarian tension, and its violent and less violent manifestations. There must be access to much information, which requires greater transparency and openness from state institutions.
  
66. Although the state bears the primary responsibility for confronting and effectively responding to sectarian violence, other social organs also bear a measure of responsibility to actively confront the danger of escalating sectarian tension. Both parties bear the consequences of the four-decade failure to deal with the danger and try to eliminate it. The responsibility of non-state bodies is shared by civil society, the media, Muslim and Christian clerics and local social leaders.
  
67. Restricting or refusing the involvement of civil society is a grave mistake whose price we will all pay. The state with all its institutions has not and will not be capable of dealing with various social problems on its own, including sectarianism and sectarian tension and violence. The state must realize that it is time to give space to civil society groups to help solve social problems, and it must respond to their legitimate demands, first and foremost the right to freedom of association.
  
68. Observing all human rights, enabling all individuals without discrimination to exercise these rights, respecting the Constitution and the law, enabling individuals to access justice and seek fair remedies, involving people in managing their own communities society, enabling an active, effective civil society, combating poverty with a commitment to social justice—all of these measures will undoubtedly help alleviate sectarian tension and its manifestations.
  
69. Where poverty is concentrated, rates of sectarian violence are higher. This might be the logical result of the link between the findings of the 2008 Human Development Report for Egypt and the reality of sectarian violence on the ground. The map of

poverty contained in the Human Development Report indicates that poverty is concentrated in villages and especially the villages of Upper Egypt. In our documentation, the EIPR found a close correlation between sites of poverty and the locations of sectarian violence. Most incidents of sectarian violence and the largest-scale incidents take place in villages and hamlets in Upper Egypt, followed by smaller cities and then the provincial capital and major cities.

70. Most of the testimonies obtained by the EIPR indicate that young men carry out most acts of sectarian violence. A no less serious problem is the isolation of a large segment of young Christian men, who are not integrated in society whether through schools, universities, clubs or civic associations. These are two sides of the same coin, and they require that youth be at the heart of any attempt to address sectarian violence.

## **Recommendations to the Egyptian government**

71. In the short term, the EIPR recommends that the Egyptian government immediately implement the following measures:

1. Immediately investigate all incidents of sectarian violence, hold those responsible to account and fairly compensate the victims.
2. Continue to stress the political message contained in the President's speech on Science Day, in January 2010, and his speech on the Prophet's birthday, in February 2010. Both speeches stated that there is a problem in our country that we must cooperate to solve and that the state will shoulder the responsibility of applying constitutional provisions on citizenship and equal rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination.
3. Urge the People's Assembly to appoint a special committee to study the problem of sectarian violence and hold public hearings to discuss the issue that bring in victims, experts, independent civil society groups and experts, and high-level state officials.
4. End the security establishment's violation of the Constitution and law, which leads to or escalates sectarian tensions; hold those responsible for abuses to account; and guarantee that the security apparatus applies the law in a non-biased fashion and protects the security of all Egyptians.
5. Take action to better the capacities of prosecutors to investigate crimes linked to sectarian violence so that they can identify the perpetrators; issue clear directives against accepting reconciliation for crimes with which it is not permissible; continue investigating incidents in which the Public Prosecutor is entitled to investigate regardless of reconciliation; and take action to refer suspects to trial with sufficient evidence in a timely manner.
6. End undeclared, discriminatory policies against Christians in all public offices; establish hiring criteria on the basis of competence alone; and issue an anti-discrimination and equal opportunity law, as recommended by the National Council for Human Rights and as is consistent with the relevant constitutional principles.
7. Review all Egyptian legislation to ensure that it is free of direct or indirect religious or faith-based discrimination.

72. In the medium and long term, the state must take several measures immediately, although their cumulative impact may take a relatively longer time to be felt in light of the failure to adequately address the issue over the past four decades. These measures include:

- Mandate an independent research team to undertake a comprehensive study on the historical and substantive root causes of sectarian tension in Egypt and its violent and less violent manifestations. The study should objectively and frankly assess the government's response over the last decades and explore

ways to address the tension while drafting a roadmap that contains clear, specific, measurable and time-bound obligations.

- Draft a strategy for educational reforms that will make public and private schools national institutions for inculcating the principles of religious tolerance and coexistence among all Egyptians; train teachers capable of leading this reform process; and rectify educational curricula to be capable of implementing this strategy, as part of a broader strategy for integrating human rights values and principles in school and academic curricula.
- Intensify the state-owned media message around human rights principles and concepts, religious tolerance and coexistence for all Egyptians in one country, and encourage the private and partisan media to participate in serving this message.
- Start training those responsible for administering and applying the law to respect human rights values, principles and concepts, including the respect of religious difference and non-discrimination on the basis of religion. This training should include judges, prosecutors, policemen, teachers and administrators at every position.
- Work to integrate young people into state cultural, social and political institutions and take action to devise effective mechanisms for ending the alienation of segments of Christian youth and reintegrate them into society, after examining the reasons for their alienation.
- Involve the Islamic and Christian religious establishments in a strategy to strengthen the values of religious tolerance and coexistence for all Egyptians.
- Enable civil society organizations to take up their responsibilities and encourage all individuals, in rural and urban areas, to join the state as it confronts sectarian violence.

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