



Egyptian Initiative  
for Personal Rights

# AS YOU WERE

**The Law on the Construction  
and Renovation of Churches  
One Year Later**



# **A Death Foretold\***

## **The Law on the Construction and Renovation of Churches One Year Later**

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### **Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights**

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\*The title of this report is inspired by Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez's novel Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1981)

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## Introduction

On September 28, 2016, Law 80/2016 was adopted to regulate the construction and renovation of churches and their annexes. State officials, parliamentarians, and some sectors of the Christian ecclesiastical leadership heralded the new law as a solution to the long-standing difficulties of building or renovating churches. They said the law would reduce sectarian tensions and violence caused in part by the ambiguous legal framework regulating Christian religious practice. In contrast, members of the human rights community and Coptic activists offered critical observations prior to its adoption. They said it would further entrench religious discrimination and legitimize the al-Azabi Pasha Conditions<sup>1</sup>, the previous guidelines which made building a new church an extremely complex process.

While the law was under discussion, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights launched a campaign titled, “Closed on Security Grounds: For a Fair Church Construction Law.” The campaign sought to highlight the most significant hurdles to Coptic citizens’ exercise of their right to worship and religious practice, as exemplified by the administrative and security complications involved in the construction of churches. The EIPR noted during the campaign that the persistence of these barriers is the most significant driver of sectarian violence, particularly following the revolution of January 25, 2011.<sup>2</sup>

The EIPR also released an in-depth commentary on the new law detailing reservations about its content and the process that culminated in its passage. The new law simply codified the de facto flagrant discrimination against Copts seeking to exercise the right to worship. This was clear in the law’s complex conditions for approving new church construction and its provisions delegating construction regulations to the security apparatus. This is a recipe for sectarian violence, which contradicts the declared objective of the long-awaited law.

The EIPR also criticized how the law was drafted and ultimately adopted, a process that took place in closed discussions limited to government representatives and the Egyptian Coptic Church. There was virtually no input from civil society, regular citizens, or even parliamentarians themselves, as if the matter of regulating a fundamental constitutional right were a purely ecclesiastical/security issue that did not concern Egyptian Muslims or Copts.

EIPR then issued a study titled “Closed on Security Grounds: Sectarian Tensions and Attacks Resulting from the Construction and Renovation of Churches.” The report sets out the findings of legal and field research on the obstacles to Coptic Egyptians’ exercise of the right to worship, which obstacles the new law fails to comprehend, let alone address. EIPR hoped that the campaign and the study would help clarify the magnitude of the crisis, which was unreflected in the law, and spur key players, government bodies, parliamentarians, civil society organizations, and religious institutions to ensure that implementing this law will not further restrict new church construction.

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1- In reference to Mohammed al-Azabi Pasha, Deputy of the Ministry of Interior who outlined ten conditions for building churches in February 1934

2- For further details, see the campaign’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ChurchesCoptlaw/>.

In light of its conclusions, it was hoped the study could build momentum for amending the flawed law in the foreseeable future.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly a year after the law was issued, EIPR releases a new report on its implementation, examining whether it has alleviated sectarian tensions associated with the construction of churches and remedied the discrimination in the right to worship. The report also offers an assessment of major player's roles by analysing the official decrees issued for the construction of new churches, and it looks at the formation of the committee tasked with legalizing the status of existing churches.

The report contains an analytical section and an annex. The analytical section discusses the executive decrees issued by the administration and published in the Official Gazette, as well as relevant statements from government officials. It also contains EIPR's commentary on the prime ministerial decree that formed the committee to resolve the status of existing, functioning churches. Additionally, this section analyses incidents of sectarian violence and tension associated with Christian practices that occurred from the adoption of the law on September 28, 2016 through the end of October 2017. That 13-month period saw 20 such incidents, including official responses and interventions. The annex contains a detailed documentation of these incidents.

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3- Closed on Security Grounds: Sectarian Tensions and Attacks Resulting from the Construction and Renovation of Churches, 2016, <https://www.eipr.org/en/publications/closed-security-grounds-sectarian-tensions-and-attacks-resulting-construction-and>

## I. Official decrees concerning new churches

Since the enactment of Law 80/2016, no official decree has been issued licensing the establishment of a new church in any Egyptian governorate. This is clear from a review of the Official Gazette, which publishes decrees of state institutions. Only three relevant decrees were published. They allocated six tracts of land for six churches in the new cities, three each for the Orthodox and Evangelical denominations. These decrees alone do not initiate church construction. Further permits are required from municipal authorities including the governor of the province.

The content of the decrees was as follows:

1. On October 4, 2016, the board of the New Urban Communities Authority approved the allocation of two plots of land for two Evangelical churches and a third plot for an Orthodox church:
  - a. A plot of 1,466 m<sup>2</sup> in the services area of the Fifth Vicinity in the 840-feddan extension area of New Minya, to be used for an Evangelical church given the approval of the main planning and projects committee in session no. 2, minutes report no. 15 of 2016.
  - b. A plot of 1,651 m<sup>2</sup> for the establishment of another Evangelical church in the service district of the Third Quarter of the Fourth Vicinity in Badr, given the approval of the main planning and projects committee in session no. 2 of February 2016, minutes report no. 11 of February 17, 2016.
  - c. A plot of 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> for the establishment of an Orthodox Coptic church in the 180-feddan southern extension area along the Ring Road of New Fayyoun. The plot of land was rezoned by order of the main planning and projects committee in session no. 3 of December 2015.

The approval of the three churches is contingent on compliance with the following conditions:

- a. Compliance with the building codes for religious structures (proportion of the tract designated for building, height, and external projections) authorized by Ministerial Decree 232/2009.
- b. The church shall be built by the applicant. If construction is not completed in the specified period, the land and all structures on it will be repossessed pursuant to the regulations in force at the agency. The land will remain the property of the city and the remainder of the tract shall be used as green areas and a parking lot. No walls may be built around the plot of land. The grant is conditional on compliance with Annex 7 of Law 4/1994 on the environment, regulating permissible noise levels; pursuant to the rules in force at the agency; and provided the body obtains the permits and approvals from the competent bodies and secures a presidential decree.



2. On November 27, 2016, the executive board of the Port Said governorate, presided over by Governor Adel al-Ghadban, approved the allocation of a plot of land of 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> for the establishment of a new church for Orthodox Copts in the governorate, east of Riyadiya village in the Dawahi neighbourhood. Decree 960/2016 approved the land designation.
3. On March 22, 2017, in issue no. 12 of the Official Gazette, Cabinet Decree 385/2017 was published allocating, free of charge, two plots of state-owned land in the South Sinai government for the construction of two churches:
  - a. One church for Evangelical Copts in Sharm al-Sheikh
  - b. One church for Orthodox Copts in Nuweiba

On January 6, 2017, President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi offered Christmas well wishes during the mass at St. Mark's Cathedral in Abbasiya and announced the construction of the biggest church and mosque in the new administrative capital: "Next year will mark 50 years on the cathedral [construction], and next year the new administrative capital will have the biggest church and mosque in Egypt. I'm the first person who will contribute to the construction of the church and mosque, and we'll celebrate the inauguration next year." No official church establishment decrees were issued.

On October 11, 2017, Gen. Kamel al-Wazir, the chair of the Engineering Authority, announced that the Nativity Church, built by the Authority in the administrative capital, would open January 7, 2018. He added that it was bigger and more architecturally distinctive than St. Mark's Cathedral in Abbasiya. Speaking in the presence of the president during the inauguration of the first phase of the new capital, Wazir said that the Nativity Church sat on a parcel of 15 feddans, or the equivalent of 63,000 m<sup>2</sup>, with the built area covering 10,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

Meanwhile, several legal representatives of the Orthodox Church submitted applications to establish churches in areas inhabited by Christians but lacking existing churches. Though the legal representatives sought approval from the relevant governor and met all the necessary conditions, officials did not respond, either to approve or deny them. This is despite the fact that the law requires the governor to respond within four months and any denial of a permit must state cause (Article 5). Several bishops said they had questioned the governor and the security director directly about the new procedures and standards. They were told that the old procedures would be applied and that the governor would refer the application to the security bodies for an assessment of the security situation, on the basis of which applications would be approved or denied.<sup>4</sup>

For example, on December 29, 2016, Girgis Zakariya, an authorized legal representative of the church, submitted an application for the construction of a new church in Nagaa Rizq Shenouda, in the Tahta district of Sohag. As required by law, he submitted all the necessary documentation, the blueprints for the church building, and a petition signed by 1,000 village residents asking for swift construction. The Sohag governor did not issue a building permit and did not offer a reason why.<sup>5</sup>

According to legal documents filed by the church, some 3,500 Christians live in Nagaa Rizq Shenouda, all in one area. They have been waiting for the construction of a church on land designated for that purpose in the middle of a Coptic residential area since 1971. Villagers said they had filed

4- Several statements from Christian clerics obtained by EIPR.

5 Two telephone interviews with Girgis Zakariya, the legal representative of the Nagaa Rizq Shenouda church, Jan. 2017 and Oct. 28, 2017.

more than 30 applications over 46 years with the Ministry of Interior and the security directorate, to no avail.

According to various statements, no clear, uniform directives have yet been issued for the implementation of the law. This has raised questions about the very existence of implementation regulations. In a meeting with 50 priests from the diocese of Biba, Fashn, and Samsata, the governor of Beni Soueif, Sherif Habib, said on June 17, 2017, “The law on the construction of churches is not in effect and is suspended because no implementing regulations have been issued.” The meeting was held to discuss the crisis facing the Copts of Saft Kharsa in Fashn, Beni Soueif.<sup>6</sup>

During the meeting, Christian clerics complained of the security service’s intransigence, their inflexible treatment of churches in the diocese (which covers the districts of Fashn, Biba, and Samsata), and the indignities Christians suffered to build or repair churches or even find a place to worship in the diocese. In the latest incident, several policemen stormed a services building owned by the diocese in Saft al-Kharsa.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Cabinet spokesman Ashraf Sultan said that the church construction law had no implementing regulations but is nevertheless in force. He cited Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017, published in the Official Gazette on January 26, 2017, on the committee tasked with examining the status of existing, unlicensed churches.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, in its 106th session on May 25, 2017, the New Urban Communities Authority released the rules for land allocation applications for new and existing churches as well as associated social services.

The decree provides for the following:

1. All churches approved by the administrative board without a presidential decree pursuant to Law 80/2016 must complete the requisite procedures, after applications are filed by the denomination’s legal representative.
2. All applications not yet reviewed should be resubmitted by the denomination’s legal representative, who should be a lay member determined by the supreme head of the denomination. A document establishing the capacity of the supreme religious leader should be appended to the application. The application will be processed by the administrative board in accordance with the guidelines from the General Organization for Physical Planning. Granting applications will be informed by Father Boula’s statement, as follows:<sup>9</sup>
  - Lower Egypt: 90 percent, Orthodox; 7 percent, Evangelical; 3 percent Catholic
  - Upper Egypt: 80 percent, Orthodox; 10 percent Evangelical; 10 percent Catholic

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6- The EIPR obtained statements from several people present at the meeting.

7- Telephone interview with Archpriest Abd al-Qaddous Hanna, counsel for the Biba and Fashn bishopric, Jun. 18, 2017.

8- Statement made by ambassador Ashraf Sultan on the “Another Word” program on Dream channel, Aug. 25, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D11Q\\_yqMwm8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D11Q_yqMwm8).

9- Decree from the administrative board of the New Urban Communities Authority, session no. 106, May 25, 2017, <http://www.newcities.gov.eg/about/Decisions/dispedc.aspx?ID=285>. (accessed 9 March 2018)

- Applications approved by the agency's administrative board after the enactment of Law 80/2016 should be filled out by the denomination's legal representative, a lay member selected by the supreme head of that denomination. A document establishing the capacity of the supreme religious leader should be appended to the application. The application will be processed pending the receipt of population data for Christian citizens from the national identity card.
3. The area of land allocated will be determined by the target population in each city. Allocation will also take into consideration previous land allocation per denomination to preserve land for for the churches of other denominations. Future sites shall be identified for consideration with the legal representative's application.

It should be noted that this decree only concerns new urban communities and cities and only regulates land allocation. It has no bearing on decrees sanctioning the practice of religious rites, the establishment of churches, or other approvals issued by governors. Additionally, it links the area of land allocated to population. This ill-defined standard reflects how state bodies see the right to worship: a right contingent on a certain threshold of non-Muslims. In addition, it identifies the population of various denominations as a constant number, which could prejudice smaller denominations. This possibility is especially likely since, according to the decree, the Authority drafted these terms solely in cooperation with Father Boula, the Orthodox bishop of Tanta.

## II. Regularizing the status of existing, unlicensed churches

The restrictive statutes governing the establishment of churches led to the proliferation of churches—some from centuries ago—whose establishment was never sanctioned by a decree from the Ottoman Porte, the king, or the president. Other churches were created with the oral approval of the security establishment and have been used for worship services for decades without official papers. Some of them look like traditional churches, while others are halls or homes in which prayer service is regularly held.

The church construction law contains three articles dealing with the legalization of functioning, unlicensed churches, service buildings, and places of retreat used for prayer and the provision of religious services to Christians. These articles provide for a committee to regularize the legal status of these churches within a set timeframe and under certain conditions.

On January 26, 2017, Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017 was issued forming this committee. The committee is chaired by the prime minister and includes ten members: six ministers (Defence and Military Production, Housing and Urban Community, Local Development, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, Justice, and Antiquities), one representative each from General Intelligence, the Administrative Oversight Authority, and the National Security Agency of the Interior Ministry, and one representative from the Christian denomination in question.

The EIPR offered several observations about the composition of the committee, summarized below.

- Firstly, the composition of the committee is unfair and does not represent all parties with a stake in the construction and renovation of churches. The committee is dominated by government bodies, particularly security bodies, raising suspicions that the same old security approach will prevail when making decisions about the construction of churches. The committee's decisions are made by majority vote, meaning there are ten government votes against one vote from the Christian denomination in question. In addition, the decree is silent on the nature of the denomination's representative. Will each denomination have one representative, or is it one representative for all Christian denominations? How is the representative chosen, and is he a standing member or does it change depending on the particular church or geographic area in question?
- The fact that the committee proceedings are confidential violates citizens' right to know the grounds on which a license for a church or service building is approved or denied. The secrecy suggests that the committee is a mere formality and does not fulfil the spirit and objective of the law. It also allows for extra-legal compromises, especially given the lack of any standards governing the committee's work and debate within in.
- The deadline to submit applications for legalizing church status was September 28, 2017. The committee cannot consider any applications submitted after this date. Nevertheless, the decree forming the committee did not set a deadline for considering and responding to applications.

The committee may therefore stonewall and withhold a response to applications, without giving any reasons.

- The decree forming the committee set forth the same five conditions enumerated in the law with which all applications for legalizing church status must comply. The EIPR offered a detailed critique of these conditions when the law was issued, concluding that they excluded hundreds of functioning churches from consideration for legal status.
- The decree did not set forth any appeal procedures or grounds for appeal in the event of a denial. It also lacked the provision in the law itself that prohibited suspending religious activities and practices in churches and service buildings. This raises questions about the future of antiquated buildings denied a license in the event of their collapse or demolition.

The deadline for churches to submit applications and documentation to the regularization committee was September 28, 2017. According to statements obtained by EIPR researchers, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Catholic denominations submitted some 3,730 applications to legalize the status of existing churches and service buildings.

Archpriest Mikhail Mikhail Antoun, the vice-chair of the committee to inventory all unlicensed Orthodox Coptic churches, told the EIPR<sup>10</sup>:

We submitted applications for 2,600 churches and service buildings under the Orthodox Church from various governorates. We received applications and documents from dioceses up until September 28, 2017, which was the committee's deadline to submit applications to legalize unlicensed churches. Government subcommittees started surveying churches in Daqahliya and Giza governorates in September. Their work was limited to forwarding reports to the ministerial committee on the structural condition of the surveyed churches. No church delegate accompanied them during the surveying process.

The ecclesiastical committee meets with the ministerial committee in official sessions for discussion, during which a select group of churches from various governorates are considered. I don't think there are any churches that need to legalize their status that did not submit their papers. The churches that submitted applications are functioning churches in which Christians worship.

Archpriest Antoun added that there is no specific deadline for adjudicating these churches' status. "The law is clear and protects the right to pray in these churches pending adjudication, even if it takes years. All the churches that applied for legal status will be approved because there is no reason for refusal."

Nabil Nagib Salama, the director of media and public relations at the Evangelical Coptic Agency, told EIPR,<sup>11</sup> "About 1,020 churches and service buildings applied. This included 39 conference and service buildings, 981 churches, including 11 Episcopal churches. Now that the papers and documents are submitted, we are waiting for the committees, which will include a delegate from each denomination."

Asked when approvals for legal status are expected, Salama said, "Let's be clear. Processing these applica-

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10- Several telephone interviews, the last on Oct. 1, 2017.

11- Several telephone interviews, the last on Oct. 1, 2017.

tions will take a long time, perhaps two years, because more than 3,000 churches and Christian facilities applied. Adjudication is a big process—it's not just about submitting some papers and that's it, they'll approve them. Everything of course must be presented to security authorities for their opinion, but until each file is processed the sites that applied for legalization will remain open by the force of law."

Gamil Halim, the legal advisor for the Catholic Church, told EIPR,<sup>12</sup> "The Catholic Church submitted papers for 110 churches and service buildings in all Egyptian governorates, including some very old, historical churches that never received a royal or presidential decree. All of them have been hosting religious services for years."

On October 8, 2017, church representatives and the legalization committee met for the first time at the Housing Ministry. They decided to hold a monthly meeting to submit remaining documentation and consider applications for legal status. The committee would begin by reviewing the submitted application files and documentation and if any application needed supplementary materials or clarifications, they would be reviewed to be ready for the next phase. Then, the specialized engineering committees would visit the sites and prepare reports in light of the structural reports already filed for churches and service buildings. After the engineering committees complete their work, the committee will prepare reports on the status of churches, which will be forwarded to the high committee headed by Prime Minister Sherif Ismail. The committee will make the final decision on their status and issue licenses to the approved churches.<sup>13</sup>

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12- Several telephone interviews, the last on Oct. 1, 2017.

13- Statement from Nabil Nagib Salam, media and public relations director at the Evangelical Coptic Agency, Oct. 20, 2017.

### **III. Sectarian violence and tension associated with the construction of churches from September 28, 2016 to October 31, 2017**

The EIPR documented 20 cases of sectarian attacks and tension linked with worship practices since the law was issued on September 28, 2016 through the end of October 2017. As usual, the Minya governorate saw the most incidents, with nine cases distributed as follows: four in villages in the Abu Qurqas district, three in the Samalout district, and two in the Minya district. All nine cases of sectarian tension occurred in these three districts, located in the heart of the governorate.

Beni Soueif came in second with five incidents, four in the Fashn district and one in the Biba district. Sohag governorate was the site of three incidents, while Cairo saw two incidents, and Alexandria saw one. Looking at the distribution of these numbers, we find that Fashn in Beni Soueif and Abu Qurqas in Minya were the major flashpoints for tension and violence associated with the construction and renovation of churches.

Half of all incidents involved efforts to prevent worship services in buildings used as churches with the oral consent of security bodies. Six incidents were related to the renovation or expansion of existing churches, while three incidents were connected to the establishment or demolition of service buildings. One case involved allegations that a Christian-owned farm was being converted into a church.

In most cases, security officials and local government bodies shut down these churches, prevented renovations from moving ahead, and denied worshippers access on the grounds that they had no official license. In five cases (25 percent of the total), organized marches, some of them after the Friday prayer, saw participants roaming the streets chanting slogans rejecting the presence of the church or against local Christians. In these cases, some Copts' property was damaged by fire or pelted with stones. Various shops were looted and Copts were also physically attacked, most of them sustaining light injuries.

Interventions by official bodies resulted in eight functional churches being shut down. Copts were prohibited from accessing the sites or holding worship services in them. This is a violation of the church construction law which provides for the continued use of pre-existing churches even if they do not meet the conditions for legal status set forth in the law and the prime ministerial decree forming the concerned legalization committee.

In one case only—in the village of al-Furn in the Minya governorate—a church was reopened for worship after the intervention of the president. The expansion and renovation of five churches was suspended, and a Coptic-owned farm was razed amid fears of its conversion into a church. Security forces also halted the construction of a services building, postponed the demolition of a building, and removed a wall separating a church and its associated service building.

In one case, permission was granted to demolish a licensed church and rebuild it as a single-story structure with no obvious external religious markings.

In some cases involving demolishing service buildings, Copts assembled to prevent the local authorities from carrying out the orders, which were temporarily suspended.

Official interventions thus took various forms. Security closed down functioning churches or service buildings under construction citing the lack of permits, although no bodies or individuals in the local community had filed a complaint. These violations were typically accompanied by the assault and arrest of people present. They were then questioned on charges of worshipping in a house with the objective of converting it into a church. Local authorities had a hand in these violations, issuing demolition orders on the grounds of building code violations. In a small number of cases, some people involved in attacks on Copts were arrested, but they were later released and no case found its way to court.

Executive and popular leadership organized customary reconciliation sessions. These resulted in worship services suspended inside churches and renovations suspended pending official permits from security bodies. Those same bodies later refused to approve Christian applications for such permits and aggrieved parties were compelled to waive legal claims for the attacks perpetrated against them.



## Conclusions

- Citing a lack of official permits, the security apparatus shut down several church buildings regularly used for services in violation of the church construction law. When a legal representative of the church applied to obtain such licenses, security denied approval.
- The way the legalization committee was formed and the secrecy of its proceedings indicate that the crisis for existing, unlicensed churches persists. This does not reflect the authorities' genuine intention to resolve the issue by granting licenses. In fact, it could open the door to further social tensions given the stringent survey process by local authorities, the protracted consideration of documentation, and the conditions that must be met.
- No official decrees established churches, although some officials did give oral approval to begin construction. This confirms that the methods in use prior to the law still persist. Such methods approved a very limited number of licenses for already existing churches. This led to the proliferation of hundreds of unlicensed churches, which now should be considered for regularized status by the committee.
- Moreover, the construction of churches in this way creates and perpetuates conditions of illegality. Under the law, churches should obtain legal approvals prior to construction. Since the deadline to submit applications for legal status has now passed, the same problem is being generated anew. Churches receive widely-acknowledged non-written official approval and religious services are then held. As a result, churches do not secure official decrees from the governor.
- There are no well-defined standards and rules for issuing church construction decrees. This is reflected in the misperceptions of various governors, who are responsible for issuing church construction permits. It has also raised questions about whether implementing regulations for the law even exist. The EIPR previously cautioned that the lack of clarity in the law's provisions would allow for different interpretations depending on the governor and his individual perspective. This in turn permits the sort of security interventions that were long criticized prior to the enactment of Law 80/2016.
- The National Security Agency continues to manage the relationship between the state and the Coptic community. When it comes to the construction and renovation of churches, the agency exercises control exceeding that of political and executive officials. This apparatus continues to cite "security grounds" to shelve permit applications indefinitely and withhold any response.
- Law 80/2016 has failed to resolve a problem that has long plagued Coptic Egyptians. In fact, the complex language of the law has closed potential loopholes by which old obstacles were evaded, like holding worship services in homes and then converting them to churches. The law has also blurred the line between the practice of religious rites in a church, which requires a license, and collective religious observance, which is a constitutional right that may be exercised in public or private places without a permit.

## Annex documenting sectarian violence and tension associated with the construction and renovation of churches

1. After Friday prayers on November 25, 2016, a group of residents of al-Naghamish, located in Dar al-Salam, Sohag governorate, attacked a building used by Copts for religious services. Dozens of people came out of mosques, some of them carrying Qurans, and began chanting religious and anti-Copt slogans, such as “We don’t want a church” and “Top to bottom and all around, we’ll bring the church tumbling down.”<sup>14</sup>

Various mobs, including women and children, then began pelting Copts’ homes with stones and Molotov cocktails. Some looted the contents of kiosks owned by Copts and headed to the hostel of Dr. Ehab Tamer, which they set on fire. The fire consumed the place and the adjacent garage.

Dr. Tamer told the EIPR, “Tremendous losses. We demolished our old house and are building another, so we moved the furniture and appliances to the hostel and the garage. The fire took it all.” He added, “The assailants cut water to the village and denied access to fire trucks more than once by cutting off the roads. The police arrived very late and were only able to disperse them by firing ammunition and tear gas, then the civil defence forces starting putting out the fires.”

The attacks damaged nine homes, breaking their doors and windows. Dr. Tamer’s hostel and garage were burned down, and three shops were looted: a grocery owned by Hanna Ishaq, a supermarket owned by Ashraf Wagih Fakhri, and a clothing store owned by Samir Farid Muharib. Four Copts, including a woman, were lightly injured: Romani Fakri, Ashraf Wagih, Dina al-Ghandour Ibrahim, and Anwar Hanna.<sup>15</sup>

Father Marqurius, the village priest, said, “There are 2,000 Copts in the village of al-Naghamish. They built a four-story building of 100 square meters to serve as a services building, kindergarten, Sunday school, and an event center for local Copts. There is no church in the town and the closest one is in al-Kosheh, 8 kilometers away. Father Wissa, the bishop of al-Kosheh, came last Tuesday for services in the building. After that, the hardliners assembled and threw stones at Copts’ houses.”

The security forces arrested 29 people who incited to and participated in the attacks. When they were brought before the Public Prosecution on November 28, 14 were released on assurance of their residence. Two minors were also released into their parents’ care. The prosecution detained the remaining 15 people for four days.<sup>16</sup>

14- The EIPR obtained statements from several local residents.

15- Statement from Ehab Tamer, a victim of the assaults, Nov. 26, 2016.

16- Nader Shokri, “Habs 29 muttahaman fi ahadith al-i’tida’ ‘ala aqbat al-Naghamish bi-Suhag,” Watani online, Nov. 27, 2017. <http://www.wataninet.com/2016/11/%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%B3-29-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%89-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A3%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7/>(accessed 10 March 2018)

On December 5, 2016, the interfaith initiative Sohag Family House held a meeting to discuss the attack on Copts after prayers were held in the Mar Girgis Church. The meeting was attended by the governor of Sohag, security leaders, and representatives of families in al-Naghamish. 14 people were being investigated on charges of arson and destruction of Copts' property.

Participants at the meeting spoke of coexistence and brotherhood between people of one nation, but this was not enough to persuade family representatives of the local Copts' right to worship. Most of the families rejected the idea of Copts practising their religion in the village. As a result, the building remained closed and worship services were suspended after the Copts worshipped there.

The governor and the security bodies asked Copts to officially apply for a license; the application is under consideration according to the law.<sup>17</sup>

2. On December 15, 2016, the Church of the Virgin Mary and St. Mar Mina al-Agaibi, located in the city of al-Salam in the Cairo governorate, received notice that construction of a church service building had been suspended on the grounds of lacking necessary permits. Several attempts were made to reach an understanding with the local bodies. Several area Christians assembled in front of the church, fearing the building materials would be seized after news spread that local officials were coming to confiscate them. It is worth mentioning that three years ago, the church had applied for a license to build a hospital to serve area residents; it has thus far not been approved.

3. On January 4, 2017, security authorities in Sohag governorate sent forces to demolish the wall of Mar Girgis Church in Nagaa al-Sawamie in the Akhmim district. This was pursuant to a district and municipal order from the Akhmim authorities (no. 1/2017/wall demolition) on the grounds that the wall was obstructing the flow of citizens going to the church service building. Several local Copts considered it part of the church and assembled around the wall, preventing security forces from tearing it down.

Ayman Abd al-Moneim, the governor of Sohag, issued directives to accept the petition filed by Father Bassada, the Coptic Orthodox bishop of Akhmim. The petition sought a stay pending an application to join the corridor separating the church building from the service building and to legalize its status either through purchase or allocation. After the governor's directives, the security force departed.<sup>18</sup>

The church built a 2.5-m wall to enclose the corridor between the church and its service building, annexing the area of the corridor to the church. The local authorities filed report no. 155/Akhmim district administrative to remove the wall.

4. On January 31, 2017, officials with the Orthodox Coptic Church of the Archangel Mikhail, located in Amoudein village, suspended demolition work on the church after the Samalout district and municipal authorities filed report no. 765/2017 against the church, asking it to halt demolition due to the lack of necessary permits. The village priest said during questioning that he had begun to demolish the building because its dilapidated state posed a threat to worshippers' lives. He said he would apply for the necessary permits and pledged to suspend the demolition.<sup>19</sup>

17- Ibid.

18 Amal Anwar, "Waqf qarar izalat sur kanisat Mar Girgis bi-Suhag ba'd iltimas asqif Akhmim," Bawaba News, Jan. 4, 2017. <http://www.albawabhnews.com/2305897> (accessed 10 March 2018)

19- Statement from counsel for the Samalout archbishopric, the administrative jurisdiction of the church, Feb. 1, 2017.

The local authorities also accused the church administration of starting demolition work on four church-owned homes adjacent to the church and covering an area of 450 m2. Incident report no. 765/2017 was filed.<sup>20</sup>

According to a press release issued by the Minya security directorate, Gen. Faisal Duweidar, the director of Minya security, was notified by the chief of the Samalout police station that local and district authorities had filed a report against the priest of the Church of the Archangel Mikhail. An examination revealed that officials with the church, a three-story structure sitting with an area of 900 m2, had begun demolishing four homes owned by and adjacent to the church, covering 450 m2. They filed incident report no. 765/2017.

Preliminary investigations by Minya police detectives found that the village is home to some 25,000 people and holds three churches, one Orthodox, one Evangelical, and one Apostolic.

5. Security forces on March 5, 2017 prevented Copts in Nazlet al-Nakhl, located in the Abu Qurqas district in the southern Minya governorate, from holding mass in a building owned by the Minya diocese, citing fears of possible attacks on the village by extremists in the village. Security forces surrounded the building and denied access to worshippers, who had been assembled since 5 am and were left in the street.

The diocese of Minya and Abu Qurqas purchased the building with the intent of converting it to the Mar Mina Church. They applied for a permit two years ago with the Minya governorate, which referred the file to the security bodies; no response has been forthcoming. Worship services had been held in the building without objection for six months and area Muslims created no problems.

Approximately 1,000 Christians live in the village and had been compelled to go the village of Mohammed Shaarawi for worship services.<sup>21</sup>

Director of Minya security Gen. Faisal Duweidar said in a press statement that Coptic citizens had been prevented from holding prayer services in a building unlicensed for ritual practice for fear of clashes in the town. He added that the archbishopric had purchased the house two years ago with the goal of converting it into a church without obtaining the required license.

Father Makarius, the bishop of Minya and Abu Qurqas, issued a statement saying that over the past days he had tried by all means with the security establishment to avoid a suspension of the religious rites, but without success. He said that the security director, the National Security inspector, and the chief of the National Security Bureau had promised him that prayers in the Mar Mina Church would resume in a few weeks.

Father Makarius said that the crisis was exacerbated that day with the potential for clashes between security and the public. Since Father Botros Aziz continued to be denied entry to the village, Father Makarius thus suggested that the worshippers assemble in a private home and hold mass there to avoid strife and give the authorities the opportunity to make amends to Copts, who were extremely insulted. He said he was waiting for action by the authorities to resolve the problem and affirm the sovereignty of the state and citizenship rights.

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20- Islam Fahmi, "Waqf a'mal hadm kanisa ba'd balagh bi-l-shuru' fi izalatiha dun tarkhis bi-l-Minya," *al-Watan*, Jan. 31, 2017. <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/1833527> (accessed 10 March 2018)

21- Statement from Anba Makarius, bishop of Minya, Mar. 5, 2017.

6. On April 9, 2017, the Fashn police station, located in the Beni Soueif governorate, halted renovations at the Mar Girgis Association in the village of al-Barqi Aqfahas. The Mar Girgis Association is used for worship services and ritual practice and the police had received a report from the Fashn municipal authorities that the renovations were in violation of the law.

According to the police report submitted to the Beni Soueif security directorate, a copy of which was obtained by the EIPR, the local authorities in the Fashn district surveyed the Mar Girgis Association. They found that the four-story building was owned by Milad Fahim Ibrahim and had been built prior to the uniform building code, Law 119/2008. The building is a residential structure except for the ground floor, which is divided into two sections: one for church services and ritual practice and another used as a wood workshop. The authorities found that the second section was being renovated, with the installation of floor tiles and columns, and that its features were being altered to become a site for religious practice. The renovations were being carried out without a permit from the competent authorities. The local authorities had issued Decree 12/2017 suspending the renovation works, but it had not been heeded.

The Fashn police station filed incident report no. 8992/Fashn misdemeanour on April 10, 2017 against the owner of the building, Milad Fahim Ibrahim, summoning him for questioning about the violations. Ibrahim said in his statement that the ground floor had contained a section outfitted for church services and ritual practice since 1993 and that police guards had been stationed there since 2001. The second section was a garage that he had cleaned up to receive visitors on the holidays and feasts. Among the questions asked of Ibrahim was: “You have allegedly changed the features of the second section of the ground floor, which was a wood workshop, renovating and expanding it to prepare a place for religious practice?”

According to a story published in *Al Masry Al Youm* on April 14, 2017, Mahmoud al-Maghrabi, the chief of the district and city of Fashn, said that the local authorities had received complaints from several residents of al-Barqi saying that the owner of the Mar Girgis Association building was making expansions in the building in preparation for prayer service and religious practice, although there was already a site designated for prayers in the building. A committee was immediately formed to survey the site, the unlicensed construction works were suspended, and an incident report was filed. The owner of the building, however, resumed renovation work, and another report was filed by the engineering department to move ahead with the work despite the suspension order; the report was forwarded to the police station.

7. On April 13, 2017, several local residents of Kom al-Loufi assaulted Copts after Maundy Thursday mass. The mass was held in the home of Eid Fahmi Mitri, who had received oral approval from the security authorities to create a mobile altar. Father Dawoud Nashid, an official with the Samalout archbishopric, was in attendance.

The assailants threw stones at the assembled Copts, injuring four of them. The following day, Good Friday, several residents gathered in the village streets to chant hostile slogans, but security set up a cordon around the homes of Copts who remained indoors and did not leave for prayers, fearing renewed attacks.

One local Copt and eyewitness said, “We didn’t know where to pray during the celebration of Passion Week, until we got security instructions to pray in Eid Fahmi’s home. But when we came out of the service, we found village Muslims throwing bricks at us and chanting. They were yelling

and saying, ‘Come quick! The Christians are praying, the Christians are praying.’ This hurt even more—they weren’t saying we’d committed a crime for example. No, it’s that we were praying.”<sup>22</sup>

The eyewitness said that local Copts used to go to nearby villages for prayers with Christians there, but Muslims in those villages objected, refusing to allow Christians from outside the village to come and pray there. He added that the attacks took place in the presence of security forces, which separated the assailants from the victims and then dispersed the crowd without making any arrests.

He said that the same evening, vacant houses on the outskirts of town, owned by Copts, were set on fire.<sup>23</sup>

In June 2016, Coptic residents of Kom al-Loufi were attacked. A building designated for worship and owned by the bishopric was closed after several Coptic-owned homes were torched following rumours that a home was being converted to a church. After the rumours spread, local Muslims refused to allow prayers to continue in the building and local Copts were forced to travel to churches in nearby villages. They were then prohibited from entering these villages after some residents objected to their assembling for prayer there. The churches in these villages are small with barely enough space for all worshippers. During these events, security forces arrested 19 people who were later released by the prosecution pending investigation. Security pledged to reopen the closed building in the village and allow religious practice, but since August 2016 they have failed to persuade local residents to permit Copts to worship in the building, despite eight different meetings with the village residents.

A statement attributed to some Muslim residents of the village set forth the conditions for their approval of the construction of a church, including that Copts worship in a one-story building, located out of town, without the name of the village on the exterior, a church tower, bells, or a cross. This, the statement said, was the only way Copts would be permitted to engage in ritual practices. Although the statement said that “the committee is operating with the knowledge of the governor,” Gen. Essam al-Badiwi, the governor of Minya, denied knowledge of it. In an official statement, Badiwi said that there was no truth to activists’ reports that he was sponsoring a “reunification committee” to determine places in Kom al-Loufi for Copts to practice their religion and resolve the renewed crisis between Copts and Muslims. He added that state agencies had only intervened to impose order and security and enforce the law.<sup>24</sup>

After the events, Copts in Kom al-Loufi took various actions. The issued several statements, the first of which said:

We, the Copts of Kom al-Loufi, have for years suffered to win the simplest rights granted to us by the constitution: the right to pray and worship in a secure place that provides dignity for us, our children, and our elderly. But this right, for which we have struggled for years, is not made available to us as Egyptian citizens. When it comes to us, our voices fall on deaf ears. There is no law to protect us and false promises given to us evaporate. Even so, we have paid the price in the burning of our homes and attacks on us in June simply because of a rumour that a farmer was building a house with the goal of turning it into a church.

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22- Telephone interview, Apr. 13, 2017. The witness’s name was withheld at his request.

23- Statement to EIPR, Apr. 15, 2017.

24- “Minya governor denies media reports of a ‘reunification committee,’” official statement on the Facebook page of the Minya governorate.

After the defendants were released in August, Copts' homes were pelted with stones and some families were forced to flee the village. Security and members of parliament pledged to resolve the crisis and provide security for families. They promised to reopen the closed building so we can practice our rites. We waited for a long time, but the promises were not kept.

Security held more than eight meetings with prominent families, imams, and sheikhs in the village to persuade them to accept reopening the building. But in each meeting, the prominent families raised their voices to deny us prayers, saying: Christians are not permitted to pray in the village. The security establishment offered extension after extension coupled with threat, but the militants did not respond to the appeals of the official bodies, at times proposing to change the location of the building to another site to stall, all the while residents of the village utterly rejected our right to pray.

The statement concluded saying: "We send our appeals to the president, who affirmed on his visit to the Cathedral that he was in a house of God. In Minya, they do not believe we have the right to enter the house of God. After all our failed efforts with official bodies in Minya to resolve the crisis since August, official measures are being taken to organize a sit-in in Cairo in front of the Ittihadiya Palace to meet the president and present our crisis to him. We will continue to pray there so that he might see how we suffer, how citizenship is killed, and how our most basic rights to pray are dismissed. Perhaps he will feel our plight, and we will see if we are indeed Egyptian citizens or if citizenship is only words said on special occasions."

The Copts of Kom al-Loufi issued a second statement with the continued rejection of extremists to permit the establishment of a church in the village:

"A year ago, we were assaulted and our homes were burned. We are subjected to long-standing harassment and have been denied our right to pray in the village for more than five years, wandering from one village to another to find the nearest place where we can lift our hands to God, who is the only one who feels our plight. It is as if praying to God is a crime for which we are punished by people who set themselves up as rulers in a state in which the rule of law is presumably respected..

We have been denied our right to pray during Passion Week and to hold the Easter Mass, spending these days locked up in our homes beset by the threat of militants. We have been waiting since August as officials promised to open the closed building belonging to the archbishopric. We waited as an attempt was made to resolve the crisis when the archbishopric purchased another piece of land on the outskirts of the village adjacent to Christians' homes. But even this did not appease the militants, who persist in their rejection amid constant incitement against us and unceasing harassment. Although the security bodies are now in control of affairs in the village, they have not taken a positive stance regarding our church. The days pass and we fear the situation will persist. We fear the victory of the extremists over the rule of law and the broken promises of the government, which though it has recognized Copts' right to pray is nevertheless incapable of implementing this on the ground."



The Copts of Kom al-Loufi made the following demands:

- Under the constitution, it is our right as Copts to practice our religion. There is no choice but to open the closed church building or permit the construction of a new building on land purchased by the archbishopric adjacent to Copts' homes.
- We reject all the extremists' attempts to move the church least 1.5 km from the village borders.
- We call on official bodies to swiftly return utilities to the five Coptic homes burned in June and built by the archbishopric. The local authorities refuse to permit installing utilities. In fact, they have fined the homeowners and some have been sentenced to prison. All this is to appease the extremists and justify burning the homes.
- A court date must be set for the 19 persons accused of setting fire to the homes and referred to felony court months ago.
- We call on the security authorities to take strict measures against inciting hatred against Copts on social media. There are people well known to security authorities for this offense, as well as some agitators within the village who have still not been arrested.

Dozens of Copts from Kom al-Loufi demonstrated at the St. Mark's Cathedral in Abbasiya in Cairo on Sunday, June 4, 2017, to protest the continued ban on worship in their village and the extremists' refusal to permit the church construction in the village.

Shenouda Adel, a Copt from the village, said, "We decided to come to the cathedral after our patience was exhausted and all efforts to persuade extremists of the church construction failed."<sup>25</sup>

In July 2017, Minya Governor Essam al-Badiwi met with Copts from Kom al-Loufi during a protest organized by Copts in front of the governorate building. Representatives of village Copts sat with the governor, telling him how they have long suffered due to the lack of a church. They explained why they rejected the "reunification" initiative proposed by some local residents, which would force them to build the church outside the village, saying that it would be a burden for the elderly, children, and the sick. They also said they would be at risk of attacks during the walk.

Affirming their demands, they submitted a memorandum to the governor and the National Security Agency:

Regarding the construction of a church in Kom al-Loufi in the proposed site outside the village, which is located approximately 700 m from the west side and 1,500 m from the eastern side of the village: this proposed site is agricultural land free of buildings, owned by Mr. Malak Dahshan, a Copt from the village.

We wish to inform you that most of our prayers and religious meetings are held in the evening. Children, women, and the elderly are thus exposed to the hazards of the road, and it would be a considerable hindrance for them to attend these prayers and meeting. Signatures have thus been collected from Copts in the village who want a better location and petition you to make available the most basic rights of citizenship with a place to pray inside the village.



The Minya governor again promised to resolve the crisis as soon as possible and work toward the construction of the church.

8. On April 19, 2017, a security force targeted a poultry farm owned by Gamal Mounir Nasrallah in the village of Gaafar, located in the Fashn district of Beni Soueif governorate. According to a statement from the farm owner, security forces claimed it was being converted into a church and razed the site without prior notice or filing an incident report.

The owner said that it was clear the campaign targeted him specifically because no other farms or homes in code violation adjacent to his farm were touched.<sup>26</sup>

9. On May 6, 2017, hundreds of residents of Kom al-Ahmar and nearby villages located in Samalout, Minya governorate demonstrated in front of the village's Apostolic church. The church had obtained an official decree for reconstruction and renovation. However, the protestors rejected the demolition and construction works, chanting hostile slogans and throwing stones at the church, prompting the security forces to remove them from the church environs. Several of the protestors were arrested.

The Apostolic church serves some 30 families in the village and was built 30 years ago. Given its dilapidated state, church officials obtained official permits to demolish the old structure and erect a three-story building. Father Bahaa Wadie, the church pastor, visited the homes of prominent families in the village to inform them of the decree as soon as the permits were received, one month before the protests. He met with no objections from local residents, but when the demolition began, and in the presence of a posted security guard, hundreds of residents from the village and other nearby towns gathered to protest.

As soon as the attacks began, security forces suspended the demolition. A few days later, a customary reconciliation session was held under the aegis of the security establishment. The session concluded by imposing several conditions, including that the church be a one-story structure displaying no external religious markings. In a statement to the EIPR, Father Bahaa Wadie said that Copts had no alternatives. Fearing the closure of the church, they agreed to the conditions approved by state officials.<sup>27</sup>

10. On May 16, 2017, officials and security forces from the Zawiya al-Hamra district of Cairo, outfitted with bulldozers and jackhammers, surrounded a licensed service building operated by the Church of the Virgin in the Qasirayn area. Several people assembled to protest the demolition and stood in front of the equipment. The equipment was withdrawn after discussions with the Christian clerics responsible for the building.

Father Youssef Faragallah, the church priest, said, "Representatives of the Zawiya al-Hamra district and security forces headed to the area to execute an order to raze the church service building, which contains a medical center and provides other services. The order came pursuant to an anonymous complaint to the district that the building had been converted into a church, which we strenuously denied. The building is simply a service building affiliated with the church and no re-

26- Girgis Wahib, "Hadm mazra'a bi-l-Fashn bi-da'wa tahwiliha li-kanisa," Watan online, Apr. 24, 2017. <http://www.wataninet.com/2017/04/%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B4%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D9%8A/> (accessed 10 March 2018)

27- Statement from Father Bahaa Wadie, May 15, 2017.

ligious rites are practised in it at all. We submitted proof of the church's ownership of the building to the authorities and proof that no building code specifications had been violated.”<sup>28</sup>

Security forces arrested three people from in front of the church: Shohdi Zaher, Emad Fawzi Anis, and Khamis Fawzi Anis. One was released and the other two were referred to the Public Prosecution on charges of resisting the authorities. The prosecution released them without conditions.

Gen. Mohammed Ayman Abd al-Tawwab, the deputy governor of Cairo for the northern and western regions, said that the service building was in violation and a removal order had been issued by district bodies. Church officials had refused to implement the order and an incident report had been filed for failure to comply.<sup>29</sup>

Father Martirus, the bishop of al-Sikka al-Hadid and eastern Cairo, said that the small building was designated for services. Occupying an area of 140 m<sup>2</sup> and located in a working-class area, it was nine stories tall. Owned by Pope Tawadrus in his capacity as the bishop of Cairo, the building is an annex of the Church of the Virgin in the Qasirayn area.

He added:

We obtained the necessary permits, and the designated contractor built the structure in accordance with them, but it seems the contractor unwittingly made some construction errors. Building code violation reports were filed, but these did not threaten the demolition of the entire building, and we received no notice of this from the district. The entire area is rife with building code violations, like any informal area, and the district has taken no action to demolish any of them. We completed the finishes on the building just a month ago and are considering filing the necessary documents to license it as a church facility. Church legal experts are currently studying the legal status to determine whether to file for a license for the building under the new church construction law, as a new facility, or to file under Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017 on the legalization of existing building. The latter currently applies to the building and it gives churches until the end of September to resolve the legal status of existing structures. The law is still new and we have no experience in dealing with it, but we are certainly obeying the law and complying with all the necessary measures.<sup>30</sup>

11. On June 16, 2017, police with the Beni Soueif governorate raided a building offering religious services in the village of Saft al-Kharsa, located in the Fashn district. After throwing various items used in ritual practice into the street, the police closed down the building and confiscated the keys.

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28- Telephone interview, May 16, 2017.

29- “Azma bayn muhafazat al-Qahira wa-l-kanisa bi-sabab mabna khadamat mukhalif bi-l-Zawiya al-Hamra,” Veto Portal, May 16, 2017. <http://www.vetogate.com/2711799> (accessed 10 March 2018)

30- Adel Girgis, “Asquf sharq al-Qahira: ana madhhul min wusul mu’addat al-hadm li-mabna tabi li-kanisat al-sayyida al-’adhra,” Ruz al-Yusuf, May 20, 2017. <http://rosa-magazine.com/news/21132/%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B0%D9%87%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B0%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AT> (accessed 18 March 2018)

Village Copts have intermittently practised religious rites in the building and received visitors there following an incident in which visitors to the Father Samuel Monastery were targeted and a local child, Bishoi Ayyad, was killed. The church received oral permission from the security forces to hold the fifteen-day and forty-day funeral prayers in the building. Father Estafanus, the bishop of Biba and Fashn, visited the village on Thursday, June 15, on the eve of the raid.

In the past, the village had been the scene of attacks on Copts and an attempt to break into several homes on the suspicion that they were being converted into churches. Local residents also filed an application, no. 544 of November 21, 2016, to convert the current building into a church; it is still under consideration.

A local Copt and eyewitness to the security attack on the building told the EIPR, “Father Estafanus visited the village on Thursday to pay condolences for the death of the child Bishoi Ayyad in the massacre at the Anba Samuel Monastery. Then at 2 am, the police suddenly raided the building, which is also used as an events hall, taking down religious pictures, sacred vessels, and also photos of the martyr Bishoi Ayyad and throwing them in the street in front of the building, along with furniture, carpets, and Bibles. Then they closed the building with chains and placed a guard on it.”<sup>31</sup>

Archpriest Ghabriyal Tawadros, the secretary-general of the Beba branch of the Egyptian Family House, an interfaith initiative, froze his membership in the institution to protest the intransigence of security; the attack on the church in Saft al-Kharsa; throwing icons, sacred vessels, and sacred texts into the street; and locking the church with chains and placing it under custody.

Two days later, some 50 priests with the diocese of Beba, Fashn, and Samsata met with Beni Soueif Governor Sherif Habib, the director of intelligence Mohammed Saad, and governorate secretary-general Yosri Khidr in the governorate office in New Beni Soueif.<sup>32</sup>

The priests criticized the police raid on the building, the damage to its contents, and its forced closure, noting this was the first time security shut down a building and seized the keys.

Governor Sherif Habib said that according to his information, the owner of the service building, not the police, was the one who threw out the building’s contents. He added that since the site was unlicensed, no religious rites could be practised there and a demolition order had been issued. A priest present corrected his information, saying that an application for legal status had been filed the previous November and that there were images showing police throwing items from the building into the street.<sup>33</sup>

The governor stated, “The church construction law has still not gone into effect because the implementing regulations have not been issued.”

At the end of the meeting, the governor ordered the building opened immediately, though not for ritual practice. He said that a memo should be written to the prime minister seeking permission to worship there and to convert it to an association. He said that a response would come within 48 hours. The church received no response to its request.

The diocese priests aired other complaints at the meeting, as well. Some complained of security’s

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31- Interview with an eyewitness, Jun. 16, 2017.

32- Ibid.

33- Ibid.

clear intransigence on the issue of churches, saying that in a great many villages in the diocese, building or renovating a church or arranging a place to pray involved numerous indignities. One priest complained a church had been closed simply for installing an air-conditioner. He added that security had insulted Christianity and he demanded the offenders be punished and issue an apology to the bishopric. One priest said, "Security has given us a hard time and insulted our religion, belief, and worship. There is unbridled anger among Copts, who feel they're second-class citizens."

#### History of attacks in Saft al-Kharsa

The village was the scene of assaults on Copts on July 2, 2016 when dozens of village Muslims attacked Coptic homes, claiming a home was being converted into a church. They threw stones at the homes, terrifying the inhabitants and breaking windows.

A video of the attacks shows children and youths pelting the homes of Ishaq Fahim, Nadi Yaquob, and Ezzat Samir, along with Ishaq Fahim's car. The assailants accused Copts of establishing a church in a house under construction, although the owner of the house had received a permit to build a private home.

Some village Copts accused a Muslim from the village of inciting the village youth to attack the homes and break the windshield of Ishaq Fahim. Security forces arrested 18 Muslim youths, who were detained pending investigation. The Fashn police station detained seven Copts, a number of whom were later released without charge or action from the prosecution.

As is usual practice, a customary reconciliation session was held under official aegis. The terms of the agreement reached were as follows:

- There is no objection to Christians holding prayers in any Christian home in the village, without harassment by Muslims under any circumstances or at any time.
- Muslims have no objection to Christians building a church in the village after obtaining the necessary permits from the competent bodies; Muslim will offer their full support and will not take any action likely to hinder securing the necessary permits.
- Muslims will not hinder the installation of utilities to the house under dispute, provided its owner complies with its residential permit and complies with the blueprints for the division of apartments and rooms within it, without any halls or external or interior decorative elements that would indicate it is a church or house of worship.
- Both parties will abide by the agreement.

12. On June 18, 2017, officials and a security force from the West Alexandria district attempted to carry out a demolition order for a service building in the Hanoville area associated with the Church of the Angel Rafael on the grounds that the building was unlicensed. Hundreds of Copts were at the church for Sunday mass and their objections prevented the execution of the order.

Another storey was being added to the building, which originally had a ground floor and a first floor. A force with the Dekheila police station went to the site with Alaa Youssef, the head of the Agami district, but they withdrew when young people assembled in the building. The church announced it had suspended the construction works.

Dr. Kumail Siddiq, the secretary-general of the Coptic Communal Council, said that the force did not possess an official demolition order for the building and did not attack any of the Copts

present in the church, treating all those present respectfully. The force left without executing the demolition.<sup>34</sup>

The security force arrested a worker at the church, 38-year-old Youssef S.F., for questioning in connection with report no. 7320/2017/administrative and no. 3145/administrative of March 12, 2017; he was released the following day.

Alaa Youssef, the head of the Agami district, said the church guard was not arrested, but went with the station chief to file a building report. Youssef said that the construction workers had filed complaints with the urban development department, saying that some structures in the church were in code violation. A committee surveyed the church and found one floor and some walls in violation. They asked the church to address the violation, but church officials refused. The committee thus took the necessary legal actions in the presence of the station chief.<sup>35</sup>

13. On August 20, 2017, at 7 am, security forces prevented the Copts of Ezbat al-Furn, located in the Abu Qurqas district of the southern Minya government, from entering a church building in which prayers are regularly held, known as the Church of the Virgin and the Archangel Mikhail. The police barred access to the village priest, Father Botros Aziz, who is responsible for religious services in the town, and prevented him from holding the Sunday mass as usual. They also set up roadblocks at the entrances to the village, located at some distance from the building, and prevented Copts from leaving their homes.

Chorbishop Makarius said that security prevented the priest from entering the place of worship and compelled residents who had come out for the service to return to their homes. They again assembled that same night in a small alley between the houses to perform the prayers, and prayed the same way until Tuesday.<sup>36</sup>

Gen. Mohammed Salah, the chief of Abu Qurqas district and city, said, "Some Copts habitually went to a house every Friday to hold prayer service without a permit, which offended Muslim youth." He added that after some local Muslims attempted to prevent village Copts from practising religious rites in a home without a license, security intervened to break up the fight.<sup>37</sup>

According to statements collected by EIPR, the area in question is 55 m<sup>2</sup> and is located in an area inhabited by Christians. The village is divided into two residential areas, one for Muslims and the second for Christians, which is home to 400 people. The building was a licensed Coptic association and prayer services were held from 1999 until security forces shut it down in 2004. Copts again began using it as a church in 2011 without problems. Local Copts said that their Muslim neighbours did not object to using the building as a church.

The Abu Qurqas police station and city council filed an incident report against Copts in the village,

34- Ragab Ramadan, "Aqbat ya'taridun tanfidh izalat mabna khadamat kanasi 'mukhalif' bi-l-Iskandariya," *Al Masry Al Youm*, Jun. 19, 2017. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1150784> (accessed 10 March 2018)

35- Khaled al-Amir and Mohammed Ali, "Ra'is hayy al-'Agami: bina' mukhalif dakhil kanisat al-malak Rafa'il," *Veto Portal*, Jun. 19, 2017. <http://www.vetogate.com/2757775> (accessed 10 March 2018)

36- Phone-in interview with Father Makarius on the "Cairo 360" program, *Al Kahera wal Nas* channel, Aug. 22, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EcTGdJnT2E>.

37- Emad Khalil, Said Nafie, and Theresa Kamal, "al-Amn yafudd ishtibakat bayn muslimin wa aqbat bi-sabab 'tahwil manzil li-kanisa' fi al-Minya," *Al Masry Al Youm*, Aug. 20, 2017. <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=554561> (accessed 10 March 2018)

accusing them of practising religious rites without a license. The Abu Qurqas Summary Prosecution sequestered the building pending approval from the licensing body despite local Copts' anger at being prohibited from worship and accused of praying without a license.

Village Copts sent two appeals to the president, saying they were gravely insulted and had been prevented from praying and practising their religious rites. They said that police forces had raided and surrounded the village to prevent Copts from worshipping and leaving their homes and had verbally abused them in a way inappropriate to the dignity of Egyptian citizens.<sup>38</sup>

In the days that followed, residents of the village performed the mass for the Feast of the Virgin in a street around the closed church without interference from security forces.

On September 10, 2017, the Minya and Abu Qurqas bishopric issued a statement announcing the opening of the Church of the Virgin in Ezbat al-Furn. The bishopric thanked the president for his response to the local residents' appeals and his concern for their plight.

14. On September 2, 2017, the Beni Soueif security director halted the demolition of the administrative building inside the Church of the Virgin on Saad Zaghloul Street in Fashn. This interference was grounded in a failure to obtain a decree or licenses from the building committee and pursuant to a decree issued by the municipality for the Fashn district and city, no. 298/2017.

Beni Soueif security director Gen. Garir Mustafa summoned Talaat Atiya Abd al-Shahid, a delegate from Chorbishop Estafanus, the bishop of Beba, Samsata, and Fashn, to notify him to halt the demolition works in the property on Muntazah Street next to the Church of the Virgin, pursuant to a memo from the Fashn district and city authorities.

Father Yuhanna Zakariya Wahba, the church priest, said that demolition permits were issued to him earlier and an incident report was filed.

On September 27, 2017, security forces stopped a vehicle (license plate no. 3948WRH), driven by Mohammed Qarni Ahmed, a 31-year-old agricultural worker. The force asked him if he had transported rubble from the church and whether he had knowledge of the order to suspend demolition works. After this, some 35 Copts assembled and attempted to interfere with the security force as it stopped the car. The situation was brought under control, the car was impounded, and report no. 20453 was filed.<sup>39</sup>

The Public Prosecution ordered an investigation into the incident and its circumstances, the release of the driver if he was not otherwise wanted, and the submission of the vehicle to its owner.

Counselor Emad Ali, the public solicitor for Beni Soueif Prosecutions, assigned the engineering department to carry out a survey of the Church of the Virgin Mary and prepare a full report. Mohammed Hassan, a technician with the engineering department in the Fashn City Council, carried out the survey and allowed church officials to resume the demolition works halted pursuant to Decree 298/2017 without need to comply with the suspension order.<sup>40</sup>

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38- The EIPR obtained a copy of the two appeals from local residents.

39- Omar al-Sheikh, "Tafasil gadida bi-sha'n a'mal al-hadm fi kanisat Bani Suwayf," Al Masry Al Youm, Sep. 30, 2017. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1198560> (accessed 10 March 2018)

40- Ibid.

15. On September 14, 2017, security forces in Beba, southern Beni Soueif governorate, suspended expansion works on the Ezbat Morqos Church in Kafr Nasser, for failing to obtain the required permits. Appropriate action was coordinated with National Security Agency and the local authorities.

Church officials had demolished an interior wall in order to open a door onto an old home, owned by the Beba, Samsata, and Fashn bishopric and adjacent to the church, in order to annex the house.<sup>41</sup>

16. On October 15, 2017, security forces closed the Church of the Virgin, owned by the Minya and Abu Qurqas bishopric, following the morning mass attended by hundreds of Christians in the village. The Minya bishopric issued a statement saying the building came under attack by militants in 2015, after which the security forces shut it down. On October 15, Copts in the village began holding prayer services there again after receiving no response from security to its repeated requests for a license. Security forces closed the building the same day and denied access to village Copts. The priest staged a sit-in inside the building and the guard posted outside permitted food to be brought in to him.

According to an eyewitness in the village, the Minya bishopric purchased the house of a Christian citizen in 2014, seeking to avoid any tensions that could be occasioned by purchasing a plot of land on which to build a church. The bishopric attempted to use the house for prayer service in 2015, but several local Muslims attacked the place. When security forces arrived, they shut down the building instead of arresting the assailants and demanded that a license be obtained from the competent bodies. The witness said that they had submitted numerous applications but to no avail. Local residents, in concert with the priest, decided to again hold services there, but the church was shut down once more.

The 170-m<sup>2</sup> church is a two-storey structure. The first floor holds an events hall and administrative offices while the second is dedicated to religious practice.

17. On October 22, 2017, dozens of residents of Ezbat al-Qusheiri, part of the village of Nazlet Asmant in the Abu Qurqas district of Minya, attempted to storm the Church of Anba Moussa the Black, owned by the Minya and Abu Qurqas bishopric, spurred on by their objections to local Christians holding worship services within. The assailants set fire to the iron gate of the building and smashed the surveillance camera placed on the gate. Security forces set up a cordon inside the village following the attack.

The Minya bishopric purchased a building in the village in July 2015. The first story was set aside for a kindergarten, which was inaugurated on September 1, 2017. Another section was used for an events hall. The second story was used for worship.

Eyewitnesses told the EIPR that the Minya diocese had organized a mass a week before the incident, with the knowledge of the security authorities. A guard and village sheikh were present to secure the mass, and there was no problem. After the evening prayer, however, several young people assembled in front of the nearby al-Qusheiri mosque. They attempted to storm the church and then organized a march throughout the village streets chanting, "Top to bottom and all around, we'll bring the church tumbling down." During the march, the youths assaulted Atef Shafiq, Boqtor Nadi Yassi, and Ibrahim Ishaq Yanni, inflicting light injuries. They also pelted Copts' homes with stones and vandalized a car belonging to Fawzi Labib.

41- Hamdi Hamed, "Iqaf a'mal bina' kanisa bi-Bani Suwayf li-mukhalfat shurut al-tarkhis," Bawaba online, Sep. 14, 2017. <http://www.albawabhnews.com/2711240> (accessed 10 March 2018)



Pursuant to an investigation, Counselor Ahmed al-Touni, the public solicitor for the Southern Minya Prosecution, issued an order to sequester the building pending adjudication by the competent administrative body.

A source added that security informed Copts that the building was closed due to concerns about the safety of village Christians given objections by militants to the opening of the church.

A customary reconciliation session was convened on October 27, during which it was agreed to close down the church. Both sides further agreed to withdraw all legal complaints.

Chorbishop Makarius, the bishop of Minya and Abu Qurqas, issued a statement on October 28 criticizing the closure of the church, the failure to arrest the assailants, and the organization of a customary reconciliation session. The Minya governor issued a statement in response, saying that 11 assailants had been identified by security and an arrest warrant was being obtained from the prosecution.

18. On October 22, 2017, the diocese of Minya and Abu Qurqas said that Minya security forces had closed down the Abu Seifayn Church in al-Karam, fearing an attack by persons opposed to the church's presence.

According to a local resident, religious services have been held regularly in the building, which was purchased by the Minya diocese from local Copts and designated to serve the local Christian population. The first floor of the building is dedicated to worship service while the second is used for Sunday school. A guard from the village was posted on the building.<sup>42</sup>

A security force closed the building saying that a complaint had been filed after Copts began preparing cement to pave the floor of the church.

19. After the Friday prayer on October 27, 2017, dozens of residents of Ezbat Zakariya, Minya district, attempted to storm the Mar Girgis Church. They were repelled by security guards posted to the church. The assailants organized a march in the village streets and threw stones at the homes of Copts. One Christian woman was lightly injured.

The building in question holds a kindergarten and the Mar Girgis Church. The village's 1,500 Coptic residents had long been worshipping in an old building, which was renovated to include the kindergarten and church. Security had posted a guard on the building to secure the prayer services.<sup>43</sup>

After the attack, security increased their forces in the village and arrested 15 people for participating in the attacks while local notables worked to clear the air.

At dawn the following day, three shacks used as livestock pens on agricultural land owned by Copts were torched.

20. On October 21, 2017, security forces and the municipal authorities set out to shut down the Church of Mar Girgis and Abu Seifayn in the village of al-Hager, located in Saqlata, Sohag governorate, on the grounds that the building was in code violation. A removal order had been issued and local authorities had shut off electricity and water to the church a few days earlier.

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42 Telephone interview with a local resident, Oct. 24, 2017.

43 Statements from several local residents, Oct. 28, 2017.



According to statements from some local residents, they built the church in 2006 to serve the religious needs of the local population. The nearest church, the Church of the Virgin in al-Galawba, is located 3 km away. Prayer service began regularly in 2013. The local authority had issued a removal order for the building, but Copts appealed it and won. Since then, prayer service was regular there and a security guard was posted to protect the facility.

The four-story building sits on an area of 350 m<sup>2</sup>. The first floor serves as a rest house for the priest; the second holds the Church of the Virgin and the Martyrs Mar Girgis and Abu Seifayn; the third holds a kindergarten; and the fourth floor is dedicated to social services.

According to the village priest, a committee from the local authority of al-Galawba came to survey the building. The priest accompanied them on the mission and the committee left. The following day, a Sunday, the water and electricity were shut off by the head of the Galawba local authority and security forces denied Copts entry, citing security concerns following several complaints against the church from militants.

During a meeting with a delegation from the diocese of Akhmim and Saqlata, the governor of Sohag, Ayman Abd al-Meneim, decided to close the building while the situation was monitored in the following days.<sup>44</sup>

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44- Statement from a priest with the Akhmim and Saqlata diocese, Oct. 25, 2017.