

RELEASE IN PART B6

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Thought you'd want to see.

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The Christian Exodus From Egypt
Wall Street Journal
Thursday, October 11, 2012, 6:49 p.m. EDT
By SAMUEL TADROS

For Copts, a persecuting dictator was preferable to the Islamist mob..

Visit any Coptic church in the United States and you immediately recognize the newcomers. You see it in their eyes, hear it in their broken English, sense it in how they cling to the church in search of the familiar. They have come here escaping a place they used to call home, where their ancestors had lived for centuries.

Waves of Copts have come here from Egypt before, to escape Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalizations or the growing Islamist tide. Their country's transformation wasn't sudden, but every year brought more public Islamization. As the veil spread, Coptic women felt increasingly different, alien and marked. Verbal abuse came from schoolteachers, bystanders in the bus station who noticed the cross on a wrist, or commentators on state television.

But life was generally bearable. Hosni Mubarak crushed the Islamist insurgency of the 1980s and '90s. He was no friend to the Copts, but neither was he foe. His police often turned a blind eye when Coptic homes and shops were attacked by mobs, and the courts never punished the perpetrators—but the president wasn't an Islamist. He even interfered sometimes to give permission to build a church, or to make Christmas a national holiday.

To be sure, Copts were excluded from high government positions. There were no Coptic governors, intelligence officers, deans of schools, or CEOs of government companies. Until 2005, Copts needed presidential approval to build a new church or even build a bathroom in an existing one. Even with approval, state security often blocked construction, citing security concerns.

Those concerns were often real. Mobs could mobilize against Copts with the slightest incitement—rumor of a romantic relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman, a church being built, reports of a Christian having insulted Islam. The details varied but the results didn't: homes burned, shops destroyed, Christians leaving villages, sometimes dead bodies. The police would arrive late and force a reconciliation session between perpetrators and victims during which everything would be forgiven and no one punished. What pained the Copts most was that the attackers were neighbors, co-workers and childhood friends.

Then came last year's revolution. Copts were never enthusiastic about it, perhaps because centuries of persecution taught that the persecuting dictator was preferable to the mob. He could be bought off, persuaded to hold back or pressured by outside forces. With the mob you stood no chance. Some younger Copts were lured by the promise of a liberal Egypt, but the older generation knew better.

The collapse of the police liberated the Islamists, who quickly dominated national politics but were even more powerful in the streets and villages. This is where the "Islamization of life" (as Muslim Brotherhood leader Khairat Al Shater called for) was becoming a reality.

The Muslim Brotherhood aimed to assuage Coptic fears while speaking in English to American audiences. The reality was different. When Coptic homes and shops were looted in a village near Alexandria in January, Brotherhood parliamentarians and Salafis organized a reconciliation session that didn't punish the attackers but ordered the Copts to evacuate the village.

Soon after, the Brotherhood's Sayed Askar denied that Copts face any problems in building churches, saying they have more churches than they need. Elections featured accusations that Copts backed the old regime. When attempts to build a non-Islamist coalition were led by businessman Naguib Sawiris, a Copt, the Brotherhood's website accused him and his co-religionists of treason.

Westerners may debate how moderate Egypt's Islamists are, but for Copts the questioning is futile. Their options are limited. While Copts are the largest Christian community in the Middle East, they're too small to play a role in deciding the fate of the country. They are not geographically concentrated in one area that could become a safe zone. The only option is to leave, putting an end to 2,000 years of Christianity in Egypt.

The sad truth is that not all will be able to flee. Those with money, English skills and the like will get out. Their poorer brethren will be left behind.

What can be done to save them? Egypt receives \$1.5 billion in U.S. aid each year, and Washington has various means to make Egypt's new leaders listen. Islamist attempts to enshrine second-class status for Copts in Egypt's new constitution should be stopped. Outsiders should also keep an eye on Muslim Brotherhood politicians who are planning to take control of Coptic Church finances. At a minimum, donors should demand that attacks on Copts be met with punishment as well as condemnation.

Yet looking at the faces of the new immigrants in my Fairfax, Va., church, I cannot escape the feeling that it is too late. Perhaps the fate of the Copts was sealed long ago, in the middle of the last century, when the Jews were kicked out of Egypt. In the late 1940s, Brotherhood demonstrators chanted, in reference to the sabbath days of Jews and others: "Today is Saturday, tomorrow will be Sunday, oh Christians." And so it is.

Mr. Tadros is a research fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. He is currently writing a book about the Copts for the Hoover Institution.

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