

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Would you be able to find the MINBUZA (Dept of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands) report on Christians in Egypt 2001, and later reports on Copts and forced conversion (if any) by the European refugee assessment bodies (ie Danish, Swedish, Norwegians etc)?**
- 2. Also are you able to find any press reports by Dr Cornelis Hulsman who is a Dutch sociologist and lived in Cairo in the late 90's and reported on forced conversions. I note that there was an article written by Dr Hulsman in Middle East Times on 27 June 1999.**
- 3. Are you able to find any others?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Would you be able to find the MINBUZA (Dept of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands) report on Christians in Egypt 2001, and later reports on Copts and forced conversion (if any) by the European refugee assessment bodies (ie Danish, Swedish, Norwegians etc).**

A 2001 report on Christians in Egypt by the Netherlands Department of Foreign Affairs was not found among the sources consulted. The website of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <http://www.minbuza.nl/> does not appear to carry the report. Nor does the website of the European Country of Origin Network (ECOI); the website of the Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian Refugee Council or the European Council on Refugees (ECRE).

[Note: After further discussion with the Member, the Library was asked to contact the Department of Immigration Country Information Service, which supplied this link to the Netherlands report on 27 March 2007

http://www.minbuza.nl/nl/actueel/ambtsberichten,2003/05/egypte_christenen_x_31_07_01.html. The report is in Dutch, and the Member may decide to have some of it translated.]

A search of the website of the European Country of Origin Network <http://www.ecoi.net/> found numerous articles on Christians in Egypt. However only very few mentioned the issue of forced conversion to Islam.

A 2006 research response on Christians in Egypt from the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) contains a small section on forced conversion:

Forced conversions

According to a statement of the Canadian Egyptian Organization for Human Rights on the situation of the Coptic minority in Egypt, Islamist groups practice forced conversions of members of the Coptic community to Islam:

“Forced conversion of members of the Coptic community to Islam, largely publicized as a psychologically demeaning tactic against the minority, is practiced by Islamist groups under police manipulation and with their cooperation. Some of these cases start with rape of under age girls. This practice has expanded recently in a way that caused fear and insecurity among the Copts all over Egypt. A few months ago Muslim groups targeted two wives of priests and attempted their conversion to Islam under the protection of local police and media propaganda insulting Christians, an act that infuriated thousands of Copts who took to the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities. Other recent notorious cases of forced conversion of poor Copts were practiced by a high ranking member of the Egyptian ruling party in Upper Egypt.” (UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, June 2005, chapter “Official Restrictions on Practising Christian Worship”) (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), *Situation of Christians; conversion from Islam to Christianity – a-4863 (ACC-EGY-4863)*, 2 May http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/response_en_69657.html – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 1).

A 2001 report produced by the Norwegian group Forum 18 is relevant. Forum 18 describes itself as “a network of representatives from different Non-Governmental Organisations who wish to focus on the freedom of religion and belief”. The report itself was financed by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it examines freedom of religion in eight countries, with particular emphasis on the right to choose religion and registration systems. The section on Egypt contains discussion of forced conversion. The information is sourced from Freedom House:

Converts to Islam

By and large, converts to Islam do not face any harassment from the State and are able to change their religious affiliation on Identity Cards. However, often problems arise in the case of Christian women or girls who convert to Islam. Since the conversion of a Christian to Islam also brings shame upon Christian families, there may be reluctance to admit that, typically a daughter, has in fact converted voluntarily to Islam because she wishes to marry a Muslim. Consequently there have been reports of kidnap or rape when in fact the girl in question has eloped.

However, there have been credible reports of militant Muslims kidnapping Christian women, often with the co-operation of the local police, in order to force them to convert to Islam. They may offer the girl financial or property incentives, especially in economically underprivileged areas. In some cases there have been reliable reports of physical coercion, including rape. The following example illustrates a case of police complicity in the attempted conversion of a young girl after holding her incommunicado and the subsequent probable false conviction of her older brother:

In March 1997, 13-year old Theresa Shakir, a Coptic Christian, was taken by her teacher, believed to be an Islamic extremist to a nearby police station where they tried to force her to convert from Christianity to Islam. It took Theresa’s family nine days to secure her release from the police station, having to approach Pope Shenouda III, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the office of President Mubarak and several human rights organisations in the meantime. When she was finally released, police told the family that she had changed her religion to Islam.

In November of that year, Adly Shakir, Theresa's older brother, returned home late one night to find his parents and younger brother shot to death, his sister Nadia, wounded by gunshot. Theresa had also been killed, with her stomach cut open and disembowelled (a method said to be used by the extremist Islamic Group Al Gama'at Al Islamiya for those it accuses of apostasy). When he ran to the police station to report the incident, Adly was immediately arrested and accused of the murders. He was subjected to severe torture to force a confession. He was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging.²⁰⁶

Teresa's sister, Nadia Shakir, was hospitalised for nine days for her wounds. Although Izzat, another brother, says that he asked that she be returned to him, she was released to an uncle on the condition that the surviving members of her immediate family not be allowed to see her. The uncle died shortly after and the police took custody of her. At this time, her whereabouts are not known to her family. Freedom House is concerned that Adly Shakir may have been falsely convicted and that he has been subjected to torture. Freedom House is also deeply disturbed by the police's refusal to allow the family access to Nadja Shakir. Finally they are concerned that the police were complicit in declaring a thirteen-year-old girl a convert after holding her incommunicado (Forum 18 2001, *Freedom of Religion: A report with a special emphasis on the right to choose religion and registration systems*, February <http://www.forum18.org/PDF/freedomofreligion.pdf> – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 2).

2. Also are you able to find any press reports by Dr Cornelis Hulsman who is a Dutch sociologist and lived in Cairo in the late 90's and reported on forced conversions. I note that there was an article written by Dr Hulsman in Middle East Times on 27 June 1999.

One 2003 report by Dr Cornelis Hulsman was found which discussed forced conversion (among others by the same author which looked generally at the situation of Christians in Egypt but did not mention conversion). Other articles were found which contained quotes from Hulsman, who takes a strong stand on the issue of forced conversion of Coptic Christians to Islam, stating that there is no evidence at all that it ever takes place. Dr Hulsman was contacted by Country Research, and provided a recent opinion on the subject: he confirms the opinion given in his previous writings, but he is also cautious and does not completely rule out the possibility that forced conversion could have occurred.

The Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) published a 2003 report on the experiences of Christians in various countries. The section on Egypt was written by Hulsman, and mentions forced conversion:

There are no statistics published about conversions in either direction but certain is (sic) that the conversion of Christians to Islam is hundreds of times larger than the conversion Muslims to Christianity. **Some Christians have claimed that these conversions were the result of physical force but research showed a total lack of evidence for such claims.** The main factors for conversion are a whole range of social problems often in combination with nominal Christianity (Hulsman, C. 2003 'Christians and Muslims in Egypt', in *Freedom of Religion under Threat: Experiences of Christians in Different Countries*, ed. Bräuer et al, Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), p.32 http://www.ekd.de/report/ekd-text78_engl.pdf – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 3).

A 2005 article by Dabu for the Christian online magazine *The Social Edge* contains a lengthy discussion of Hulsman's views. While he does not here mention conversion, he does express the opinion that Coptic pressure groups exaggerate claims of persecution:

Rather than bolster better relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt, Cornelis Hulsman, the Dutch editor-in-chief of the Cairo-based Arab-West Report, believes that such news of injustices against Copts, regularly documented on www.copts.net and other Coptic activists' websites from abroad, harbour what is believed to be anti-Egyptian and anti-Islamic objectives. Though there are varying definitions of persecution, he believes Christians in Egypt are not systemically persecuted against, though they can, as a minority, experience discrimination in the hands of individual Muslims. In his view, the aggressive Coptic pressure groups abroad not only misrepresented the issue, it aggravated and even worsened the tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. He said Freedom House and the U.S. Copts Association often make claims not backed up by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch or other independent human rights organizations. The U.S. Copts Association particularly exaggerates claims, ignores facts or takes them out of context to give the most negative interpretation as possible, usually blaming Egyptian authorities and security forces for ills against Copts, Hulsman reported.

The U.S. Copts Association denied they put out fabricated stories and said that the silence on the issue may be because people in Egypt are afraid of speaking out. As for complaints about unfair hiring practices, Hulsman said as a society built on relations, it's not unusual for people to give jobs to people they know. "If a Christian has a good relationship with Muslims, (he or she) can do a lot," he says.

As for Western human rights groups' concerns of religious freedom, Hulsman said that in Egypt, individuals who are involved in missionary activities, such as distributing pamphlets in efforts to convert Egyptians to their religion could be arrested, although you are free to run a bookstore selling material on Christianity. It is also not acceptable for Christians to celebrate processions on the street unless the areas are predominantly Christian, which Hulsman says is not discriminatory as Egyptians are only trying to protect their own communities. "You have a difference in Arab and Western society. The difference is here in Egypt, Muslims and Christians both are community-oriented. In the West, it's a very individualistic church." (Dabu, Christl 2005, 'Christians living in Egypt as a minority', The Social Edge.com, March <http://www.thesocialedge.com/archives/other/3articles-mar2005.htm> – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 4).

Another news article quotes Hulsman in a similar vein:

Copts complain of job discrimination and poor political representation. Rumors spread: **Some Copts tell of Christian women stabbed in the subway for wearing tight pants, of food chains that only hire Muslims, of supermarkets where young Christian girls are accused of shoplifting and blackmailed into signing conversion papers.**

"It's a matter of mixing facts with belief," says Cornelis Hulsman, a sociologist and director of the Arab West Report – a press report dedicated to covering religious and Arab-West issues in the Egyptian press. "Many of those stories don't hold – which doesn't mean that all the stories don't hold. You are in the sphere of urban legends, of rumors. Foreigners and journalists have to be extremely careful about what they hear."

Hulsman, who is Christian, suggests that some Copts exaggerate their "underdog" status, especially when talking to outsiders. He says that discrimination does take place, but that "it goes both ways. (It's often a matter of) giving priority to your own friends. But Muslims happen to be the overwhelming majority, so Christians feel this more. This whole society is based on relations. If you as a Christian have good relations with Muslims, you can often avoid problems; you find your way through. It's a matter of relation-building." (Lindsey, Ursula 2004, 'Coptic church construction heightens tension in Egypt', *The Daily Star*, 24 May http://cache.zoominfo.com/cachedpage/?archive_id=0&page_id=696361004&page_url=%2f%2fw

www.dailystar.com.lb%2farticle.asp%3farticle_id%3d4187%26categ_id%3d2&page_last_updated=5%2f23%2f2004+6%3a14%3a48+PM&firstName=Cornelis&lastName=Hulsman – Accessed 19 March 2007 – Attachment 5).

Hulsman is also quotes in a 1999 research response by the Canadian Research Directorate:

Dr. Cornelis Hulsman, a Dutch sociologist and journalist, Editor-in-Chief of the Religious News Service from the Arab World (RNSAW) and Deputy General-Secretary of the Cairo Foreign Press Association, lives in Cairo, Egypt, has “extensively studied the relations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt over the past four years and [has] concluded that there is **no evidence of Christian girls being kidnapped but [that] there are definitely social problems that need to be tackled**” (The Egyptian State Information Service 30 June 1999). Hulsman is working on a report on conversions to Islam for the Council of Churches in New York (Middle East Times 27 June 1999) (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1999, *EGY33301.E – Egypt: Reports of male and female Christians being forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslims*, 15 December – Attachment 6).

As no recent reports from Dr Hulsman were found, a request for information was sent by email to Dr Hulsman on 19 March 2007, asking whether he still held the view that there was no evidence of forced conversion in Egypt, and requesting any additional information he could provide. Dr Hulsman is currently the Executive Director of the Center for Arab Western Understanding, also apparently called the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT) (RRT Country Research 2007, Email to Dr Cornelis Hulsman, 19 March – Attachment 7).

Dr Hulsman replied on 21 March as follows:

1. Can you confirm that you still hold the view that there is no evidence of forced conversion of Christians to Islam in Egypt?

Yes, we at CIDT (not just us personally) still hold that view, but having seen no evidence of physical force does not mean it does not occur. However, one must be extremely cautious with such claims and ensure they are thoroughly investigated. One problem is that Copts often describe conversions that go against the will of the family, that is not against the will of the individual, as ‘kidnap’ or ‘forced conversion.’ A further problem is that there is also evidence of involved Muslims combining assistance to Copts with poverty and/or social problems with preaching about Islam – to such an extent that many Christian clergy believe that such assistance is given with the intent of bringing people to Islam. Please find attached the file of Ingy, a Coptic Orthodox girl who converted to Islam. Her brother claimed she was physically forced to convert. We have investigated this story well and found no evidence for these allegations, but the investigations certainly show how the story came about and how it was seriously misreported.

2. We would appreciate any further details you can provide on this issue, and on the social position of Christians in Egypt.

One finds Christians in all strata of Egyptian society, from the very rich businessmen to the very poor, who are unable to make ends meet. Egypt is largely a strongly socially stratified society, whereby one often needs to have good relations in order to get things done. This applies to both Christians and Muslims, and does not make life easy for those on the lower end of society, including Christians. The social position of Christians is thus very diverse. It is true that Christians are under represented in the highest government functions. At the same time, one sees a relatively strong Christian presence in many middle class positions. Discussions about over or under representation in particular functions is often linked to estimates of the number of Christians. Christians often present inflated figures about their numbers in Egypt that are not based on any

serious studies or registration. We believe there is convincing evidence of Western researchers showing that the number of Christians in Egypt should be estimated between six and eight percent of the population. For further background studies please see our website: www.cawu.org <<http://www.cawu.org>> (particularly the examples of AWR reports) (Hulsman, Cornelis 2007, Email to RRT Country Research, 21 March – Attachment 8).

The file Dr Hulsman refers to on “Ingy, a Coptic Orthodox girl who converted to Islam” was not in fact attached to his email. Dr Hulsman has been contacted again with a request that he send the report he refers to.

[Dr Hulsman supplied the additional reports on 27 March 2007. They are:

- ‘Was Engy kidnapped?’ 2004, *Arab West Report*, Week 36, Art.28;
- ‘Ingy articles from AWR’ 2004, *Arab West Report*, Week.28;
- Hulsman, Cornelis 2006, ‘Editorial’, *Arab West Report*, Week 43, 17 January.

3. Are you able to find any others?

A 2006 article by an Egyptian journalist is of interest. It states that conversion has become an increasingly sensitive topic in Egypt, with the media and the security services both partially responsible for whipping up public hysteria:

2005 began with an odd scandal. Wafa Konstantin, the wife of a disabled Coptic priest, took refuge in a police station in mid-December 2004 and announced that she had converted to Islam. She demanded to be protected from her co-religionists, who sought to convince her to return to her husband’s side. Though it is difficult to know what might have motivated her, the combination of an unhappy marriage and the church’s ban on divorce (which is all the more stringent for priests) is perhaps the most plausible explanation. In any case, the affair incensed Copts, who took to the streets in Cairo and the Delta to protest what they perceived as the state’s meddling in church affairs. Within a few weeks, Pope Shenouda III himself went into retreat and threatened to stay there until the matter was resolved, even if it meant skipping mass on the January 7 Coptic Christmas. Eventually, the security services came to an accommodation with the church: Shenouda would come out of his retreat and Konstantin’s conversion to Islam would be considered null and void (under Egyptian law, conversion from Islam is illegal, but not the reverse). Konstantin has since been sequestered in the monastery of Wadi Natroun and has not been heard from, to the alarm of human rights activists who believe she is being held against her will.

While the Konstantin affair had been resolved, as far as the church and the state were concerned, it set the tone for Muslim-Coptic relations for the rest of the year. The media reported new “conversion scandals” with regularity, with many cases prompting sectarian clashes, though the “conversions” were most often fabricated or highly exaggerated. Copts accused Muslims of seducing or kidnapping young women – even raping them – turning real or imagined love affairs into excuses for violence. Muslims reacted in similar fashion, with the end result often being the brutal interference of security services to restore order.

Public sensitivity over the topic of religious conversion culminated in October 2005 with a media campaign against the Coptic Church that eventually set off riots in Alexandria. The focus of the controversy was a video recording of a Coptic play, *I Was Blind, But Now I Can See*, which features a young Copt who is persuaded by Muslim fundamentalists to convert to Islam. Once he converts, however, he sees the moral error of their ways and returns to the church. The play had been performed once before being banned by the church, but DVDs of the performance resurfaced

in the midst of parliamentary elections in a district of Alexandria where a Copt had beaten out several Muslims to become the official candidate of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Tabloid newspapers brought attention to the sudden appearance of the recordings in the neighborhood and challenged the church to issue an apology. Pope Shenouda refused to do so. On October 21, after Friday prayers, about 5,000 Muslim protesters descended on the church that had been accused of distributing the DVD. Three people died, 150 were wounded and 105 were arrested in the resulting *melée*, possibly leaving grudges that contributed to the April violence. The authorities promised an investigation – particularly into allegations that local security officers and politicians had fanned the flames – but it has yet to be completed.

At the time, human rights activist Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, an NGO focusing on the right to privacy that has documented abuses of minorities, zeroed in on the role of the security services. “Bizarrely,” Bahgat wrote in an op-ed that appeared in the October 26 edition of *al-Dustur*, “they seem convinced that the best way to prevent sectarian clashes is to forcibly prevent people from converting to the religion of their choice. As a result, an increasing number of Christians who have gone to State Security with certificates of conversion from al-Azhar to register their new status have been denied official recognition as Muslims. Mature, intelligent adults are instead forcibly returned to their families or the Church” (El Amrani, Issander 2006, ‘The emergence of a “Coptic question” in Egypt’, *Middle East Report Online*, 28 April <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero042806.html> - Accessed 26 March 2007 – Attachment 9).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Website of the Government of the Netherlands

Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs website <http://www.minbuza.nl/>

Danish Immigration Service website

European Country of Origin Network (ECOI) <http://www.ecoi.net/>

European Centre for Minority Issues <http://www.ecmi.de/>

Norwegian Refugee Council <http://www.flyktninghjelpen.no/>

European Council on Refugees <http://www.ecre.org/>

Center for Arab Western Understanding, Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT) website <http://www.cawu.org>

Factiva

Google search engine

Databases:

CISNET

ISYS

List of Attachments

1. Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), *Situation of Christians; conversion from Islam to Christianity – a-4863 (ACC-EGY-4863)*, 2 May http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/response_en_69657.html – Accessed 19 March 2007.
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3. Hulsmans, C. 2003 ‘Christians and Muslims in Egypt’, in *Freedom of Religion under Threat: Experiences of Christians in Different Countries*, ed. Bräuer et al, Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), p.32
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http://cache.zoominfo.com/cachedpage/?archive_id=0&page_id=696361004&page_url=%2f%2fwww.dailystar.com.lb%2farticle.asp%3farticle_id%3d4187%26categ_id%3d2&page_last_updated=5%2f23%2f2004+6%3a14%3a48+PM&firstName=Cornelis&lastName=Hulsman – Accessed 19 March 2007.
6. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1999, *EGY33301.E – Egypt: Reports of male and female Christians being forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslims*, 15 December. (CISNET Refinfo)
7. RRT Country Research 2007, Email to Dr Cornelis Hulsman, 19 March.
8. Hulsman, Cornelis 2007, Email to RRT Country Research, 21 March.
9. El Amrani, Issander 2006, ‘The emergence of a “Coptic question” in Egypt’, *Middle East Report Online*, 28 April <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero042806.html> - Accessed 26 March 2007.