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# The U.S. Coptic Diaspora and the Limit of Polarization

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The immigration of Coptic communities from Egypt to the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon that dates back to the 1950s. Compared to other groups of Middle East Christian descent (notably those coming from Syria and Lebanon), Coptic communities are quite new in the United States. Attempts made by the Coptic diaspora to create political organizations and to sway on U.S. foreign policy is even more recent. The first major Coptic organization was created in 1972. But it's only after the 1990s that Copts actively sought to influence American foreign policy and joined the fight for international religious freedom launched by evangelical Christians and human rights activists. The endorsement of the facially neutral language of international religious freedom allowed them to attract greater attention and to give more visibility to the issue of the "persecution" of Copts. The atrocities perpetrated since 2012 by the Islamic State against religious minorities in the Middle East have made the mobilization of American Copts look even more legitimate and urgent.

Various scholars of Egyptian Coptism (S. Tadros, 2013) have shown how the fear of violent Islamists has led the Coptic communities in Egypt to support the Church hierarchy and—if only tacitly—the authoritarian regimes of Presidents Mubarak and now Sissi. The historic confrontation among Islamists, the military and authoritarian rulers, has limited the space of possible political interventions for Copts. Not only did it prevent the opening up of Coptic communities and the emancipation of the faithful from the Church hierarchy, it also hindered the formation of a discourse of Egyptian Coptism based on the notion of equal citizenship, rather than on the concept of persecuted minority. This article shows that, in

a comparable—although different—way, the claims of Copts living in the United States have been caught up in the national culture war between liberals and conservatives and in the political feud between Democrats and Republicans. The rapprochement of some of the most prominent Coptic organizations in the United States with conservative politicians such as Marco Rubio has allowed for a stronger and more visible advocacy campaign. However it has also contributed to the absorption of the specific claims of Copts into the broader media and political battle for Middle Eastern Christians. Due to the ideological polarization that characterizes the American political scene, it has been difficult for Copts living in the United States to articulate claims that break away from the humanitarian call to protect persecuted minorities and to emphasize, instead, a political discourse of equal citizenship for Egyptians.

After briefly presenting the main characteristics of the Coptic diaspora in the United States and of its attempts at gaining political clout since the 1990s, I will discuss the impact of the election of President Obama and of the 2011 Egyptian revolution on the rhetoric and strategy of the main Coptic organizations in the United States. I also examine the changing relation between Copts in Egypt and Copts in the United States.

The article is based on interviews with leaders of Coptic organizations in the United States, Coptic scholars based in the United States, and Coptic activists and intellectuals in Egypt. It also draws upon the analysis of the documents produced by Coptic lobbies, and observation of their major conferences.

## **The Coptic diaspora in the United States**

It is only recently that the existence of the Coptic Church and the claims of Copts living in the United States have become well known to the broader American public. Until well after the 9/11 attacks, “to most North Americans, a Christian Church of Arabic speaking immigrants [was] a puzzling enigma” (Botros, 2006, p. 180). The Coptic diaspora living in the United States has attracted relatively less attention from social scientists than other groups of immigrants from the Middle East. Although scholars have thoroughly examined some particular aspects of the religious practice or political activism of some Coptic communities, no comprehensive study of the history and sociology of Copts living in the United States has been published yet in English. Existing literature generally emphasizes the important diversity in ways of life, relations to the Church and links to Copts in Egypt, modes of identification, and degree of socialization with the broader Egyptian diaspora in the United States (In the absence of data collection on the subnational identity of immigrants, the exact number of Copts living in the United States is a matter of debate. Estimates range from 91,200 to 750,000 (see Brinkerhoff, 2012, p. 8). While the term *diaspora* may be interpreted in various ways and applied differently, Coptic organizations active in the United States and Europe resort to the term. If the term were used to define a community that seeks to maintain an identity despite

the distance from the territory of origin, it would adequately describes the activities of most Coptic associations in the United States. There are two main usages of the term diaspora in the contemporary literature. One focuses on the notion of continuity and on the hope of return to the land of origin. The other emphasizes ideas of hybridization and reinvention of an identity (Dufoix, 2011). The Coptic diaspora combines elements of these two approaches, as it seeks to maintain a strong relationship with Egypt, while integrating into the American society and influencing public debate. The pessimistic understanding of the diaspora as a divine punishment is not central in American Copts' self-representation.

The Coptic Orthodox Church plays a key role in the consolidation of the connection between Copts in the United States and Egypt (Brinkerhoff & Riddle, 2012). Since the first significant wave of Coptic immigration to the United States (in the 1950s), the Church has been an important center around which the socialization of Copts took place. (There are about 200 Coptic Orthodox Churches in the United States and the estimated number of adherents is between 350,000 and 450,000). In particular, churches have had a key role in diaspora philanthropy and in creating and maintaining the link with Copts in Egypt. The degree of acceptance of the Church as an entity that is mainly responsible for philanthropy and as the only intermediary between Egypt and the United States varies across generations and years spent in the United States. As shown by Jennifer Brinkerhoff, Copts who have lived in the United States for up to 10 years are much more likely than those who have lived there for more than 25 years to want to support "any Egyptian who [is] in need," as opposed to "only [their] fellow Copts" (Brinkerhoff, 2013, p. 11). The Church has traditionally upheld a pacifist and conservative discourse regarding the role of the Coptic diaspora. While lay activists have organized to denounce the discriminations against Copts, the Church has remained faithful to a celebratory message, praising the "miracle of survival" of the Coptic Church and refusing to describe Egyptian Christians as victims (Botros, 2006, p. 192). Bishops of churches of North America usually insisted on how immigration should be a theologizing experience not a politicizing one. Church leaders in Egypt have traditionally seen diaspora activism as a headache and as needlessly politicized. Pope Shenouda—pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the Sea of St. Mark from 1971 to 2012—very clearly criticized the political opposition of the diaspora and opposed any U.S. interference in Egyptian affairs (Al Banna, 1998, Chap. 3) A 2012 extensive survey led by Coptic Orphans has delineated the most salient characteristics of the Coptic diasporas: the role of the Church in maintaining cohesion and connection with Egypt; the precedence of the Coptic diaspora's philanthropic engagement over its political engagement in Egypt; the relative low level of investment (compared to other diasporas such as Lebanese), owing to, possibly, the difficult political context in Egypt (Brinkerhoff & Riddle, 2012, p. 18).

Copts living in the United States have begun to organize politically through associations and pressure groups in the 1970s. Shawky Karas (1928–2003), a professor of mathematics at the Southern Connecticut University and originally from

the Egyptian province of Sohag, created the American Coptic Association (ACA) in 1972 to raise awareness about the rise of discrimination against Copts living in Egypt in the American public and among American policy makers. ACA organized several protests outside the White House during the official visit of President Sadat in 1975. Despite Pope Shenouda's calls to moderation and warnings against diaspora activism, President Sadat blamed these demonstrations on the pope. The relationship between the Egyptian president and the Coptic clerical establishment quickly degenerated, and in 1981, Sadat ordered the exile of Pope Shenouda at the Monastery of St. Bishoy in the Nitrian Desert. Shenouda's exile made the ACA more active and more vocal. Rafik R. Attia, the president of the Boston Chapter of the ACA, convinced members of Congress to write to President Mubarak to seek the liberation of the pope (Zaki, 2010). In other words, the years 1970 and 1980 represent the forming years of the diaspora activism for Copts in the United States.

Since then, other organizations have been created between the mid 1990s and the early 2000. A wide difference in the agenda defended by these groups, fragmentation and lack of collaboration and access to limited resources, have often characterized the landscape of Coptic lobbying in the United States, despite the tendency of some commentators to inflate their importance and their representativeness. Coptic orphans (created in 1992) is a nonprofit organization based in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Egypt that focuses on providing resources, networks, and education to children who have lost a parent. It emphasizes the struggle against poverty and the empowerment of young girls. Other organizations are dedicated to informing the American public about the situation of Copts in Egypt, and advocating for equal rights for Copts. The Coptic Assembly of America (CAA) defines its claims through the language of human rights and equal citizenship and has published the views of a wide range of experts, from liberals to conservatives. Created in 2006 by the millionaire businessman Cameel Halim, CAA was the first organization that really sought to emulate the strategy of other American pressure groups (through the promotion of multiple views, efforts to build long-term access and influence, etc.). By contrast, the National American Coptic Assembly, a small group led by Morris Sadek—the translator and promoter of the movie “the Innocence of Muslims”—spreads a violently Islamophobic and bigoted message. The innocence of Muslims is an Islamophobic 14-minute movie that depicts the life of Mohammed in derogatory and demeaning ways. Initially uploaded on YouTube in July 2012, the movie triggered massive demonstrations and violence throughout the Muslim world. The film was produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula (born 1975), an Egyptian born U.S.-Coptic citizen, who, prior to the release of the movie, had been charged several times for possession of drugs and bank fraud. While Nakoula had no real history of Coptic activism, Morris Sadek aggressively promoted the film on the blog of the National American Coptic Assembly. The U.S. Copts Association, founded by Michael Mounir in 1996, and Coptic Solidarity, founded in 2010 and led by Magdi Khalil and Adel Guindy, are other small organizations that combine a fierce

critique of Islamism and the Muslim Brothers with calls for full citizenship for Copts. The tension among Coptic leaders in the United States over strategy and vision are best exemplified by the split that occurred in 2005 between Michael Mounir, chairman of the U.S. Copts Association and Magdi Khalil, a prominent Coptic journalist and activist. In December 2005, Michael Mounir traveled to Egypt and met with officials such as the director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service, Lt. Gen. Omar Suleiman. Magdi Khalil criticized this visit as evidence of cooptation of Mounir by the Egyptian state.

Described at the end of the 1990s as coming down to “three or four guys with a fax machine” (Rowe, 2001, p. 90; 2010), they have long suffered from a lack of professionalism and a form of amateurism (Hanna, 2013). Samuel Tadros, an expert of Coptic issues at the Hudson Institute, describes U.S. Coptic organizations as “one men shows”—that is, organizations that are very much centered around the personality of its founding members but that do not succeed in creating a collective dynamics nor at finding grassroots supports. Their main instrument of action is the creation of an Internet website, where they share analyses and information, but that often privileges sensationalist stories and alarmist analyses about the worldwide conspiracy of Islamists and Obama supporters. In S. Tadros’s view, this comes from the fact that most Copts came to the United States “with a baggage,” the memory of political oppression and sectarian violence, and with a lack of political experience. Since 2000, the Coptic lobby has grown in size and in capacity building. It has also benefited from the increasing role of social media and the outreach of Christian satellite channels such as the Way or Media for Christ. The diversification within the movement and the radicalization of some groups in the post-9/11 context has made the Coptic lobby at once more visible and less effective than other pressure groups.

Up until the beginning of the revolution in Egypt in 2010, an important obstacle to the success of these organizations was the lack of support or even the fierce opposition from Copts living in Egypt. The official discourse of many Copts, activists, intellectuals, and politicians in Egypt during the Mubarak era was to reject, publically at least, all attempts to define Copts as a “minority” that should seek “protection” from foreign powers. On the contrary, they insisted on their belonging to the Egyptian nation and criticized the work of Copts in the diaspora as harmful. In 1998, Edward Ghali El-Dahabi, a Coptic member of the People’s Assembly stated that “those who are trying to incite foreigners to interfere in Egypt’s internal affairs are, in fact, stabbing Copts in the heart” (El-Din, 1998).

### **Copts’ struggle against “persecution” and rapprochement with the conservative right**

In the 1990s, both Christian evangelical lobbies and human rights organizations put pressure on legislators and policy makers, calling for U.S. action to improve the condition of Christian minorities in the Sudan and in China. The theme of the

“persecuted Church,” and calls against the persecution of Christians in Muslim countries, were spread by numerous books written by prominent evangelical writers and lobbyists (Castelli, 2005). In this context, two Republicans, Rep. Frank R. Wolf (Virginia) and Sen. Arlen Specter (Pennsylvania), introduced in 1997 the Freedom From Religious Persecution Bill that planned immediate sanctions against governments that do not respect religious minorities. Then secretary of state Madeleine Albright and a number of officials from the state department did not endorse the project, fearing that such a bill would create a dangerous hierarchy among rights. The business community also raised objections about how sanctions may negatively impact business relations with the targeted countries. A modified version of the bill was finally signed into law in October 1998. International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) creates an Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF), reporting to the State Department, and a bipartisan Commission on IRF, dependent on the White House. The main activity of the commission is to write annual reports assessing the state of violations to religious freedom in the world and identifying each year “countries of particular concern” (CPC). On this basis, the commission advises the president to undertake a number of possible actions (ranging from economic sanction to cancelling academic exchange programs).

Presented in the form of the neutral language of human rights, the fight for the legislation on International Religious Freedom in the United States and in Europe has long been a highly politicized and ideologically loaded agenda. During the Cold War, secular human rights activists and Christian evangelical organizations turned religious freedom into a common cause in their fight against Communism (Moyn, 2012). Earlier on, in the 19th century, Protestant missionaries in Egypt acted as passionate advocates for religious freedom, as they hoped that this would open up a more favorable space for proselytizing and conversions of both Coptic Christians and Muslims (Mahmood, 2012; Sharkey, 2011).

Coptic activists living in the United States acted as key supporters and advocates of IRFA, and allied themselves with Christian or conservative organizations that played a central role in spreading the theme of persecution, such as Christian Solidarity International, or the Center for Religious Freedom (CFR) of the Hudson Institute, or Freedom House. The book by CFR’s expert Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (1997), quickly became a canonical book for Western Christian activists committed to international political action (Castelli, 2005, McAllister, 2008). The alliance of Coptic activists with the Christian evangelical movement is best exemplified by the letters published in the *Washington Times* on April 12, 1998, by Michael Mounir, then leader of the International Coptic Federation, and Reverend Keith Roderick, Episcopal priest of the Diocese of Springfield and head of the Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights Under Islamicization. The letter presented the condition of the Copts and advocated for the bill against religious persecution.

Although Copts all agree on the need to advocate for religious freedom in Egypt, they hold different views on the extent to which the United States should intervene in Egyptian politics and on how the Coptic claims should be framed. According to

Magdi Khalil from Coptic solidarity, Copts should define themselves as a minority that gets inspiration from the legal repertoire of minority rights in order to claim special protection (Mahmood, 2012). Other Coptic activists, in Egypt and in the United States, vehemently contested this view and argued, on the contrary, that Copts should advocate for full equality and claim recognition not as a special minority but only as equal citizens (Ibrahim, 1998). Samir Murqus, a prominent Coptic intellectual who was appointed in 2012 as a presidential advisor under President Mohamed Morsi explained his opposition to the use of the category of minority and criticized IRFA as a form of imperialism. In the United States, other Coptic activists, without necessarily sharing the harsh criticisms developed by Murqus toward Western intervention, also chose the concept of equal citizenship over the notion of minority rights.

This debate echoes an older discussion that took place in the early 20th century at the time of the struggle for independence (P. Sedra, 2007; M. Tadros, 2012). During the discussions regarding the drafting of the first constitution in 1923, Coptic members of the Wafd Party rejected the definition of Copts as minority that should benefit from proportionate representation and argued for the recognition of full and equal citizenship to all Egyptians, regardless of their religion.

After 2001, in a context marked by the post-9/11 rise of Islamophobia and the success of neoconservative views on democratization of the Middle East under the Bush administration, a number of Coptic activists and organizations in the United States participated in the strengthening of Coptic nationalism. They promoted a revivalist view of national purity focused on the continuity between pre-Islamic Christianity and contemporary Coptism. The insistence on the use of Coptic language and the promotion of a Coptic flag were essential aspects of the development of Coptic nationalism after 2000 in the United States. Stories reported by some Coptic leaders nourished the Islamophobic narratives of right-wing pundits (Bangstad, 2014) and fed into what Paul Sedra calls the “persecution industry” (P. Sedra, 2012, September 11), based on think tanks, media, blogs, and conservative lobbies. Coptic organizations under the Bush administration, however, did not clearly lobby for direct intervention against the regime of Mubarak. They mainly pleaded for an increase of immigration quotas and warned policy makers against the danger of a possible rapprochement with Islamists.

For U.S. Copts (and to some extent even for Egyptian Copts), the 2008 election of President Obama and the changes it implied in U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world represented a turning point almost as significant as the revolution of January 25, 2010. Coptic associations of the diaspora quickly became disenchanted with what they saw as a dangerous benevolence of the Obama administration toward Islamists and a lack of interest for discussion on religious minorities. As a matter of fact, despite the continuous rise of right-wing Islamophobic rhetoric, the terms of the public debate about Islamism and the Middle East have significantly shifted in the foreign-policy establishment under the Obama administration. Amalgamation of Islam, Islamism, and Extremism is not the norm any more. The conceptual vocabulary used by official institutions became much more accurate

and less orientalist. Think tanks such as Brookings, Carnegie Endowment, CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) have played a key role in developing and promoting accurate knowledge and diverse views about political changes in the Middle East, drawing upon the expertise of both Western and Middle Eastern scholars. Significant funding coming from Gulf countries to support research on Islamist movements has played an essential role in redefining the research agenda of Washington foreign-policy circles (Lipton et al., 2014). In this context, American Copts have continued seeking support among conservative groups and think tanks. Conservative politicians and organizations appropriated the cause of Middle East's Christians for many different reasons: sincere conviction and faith solidarity, belonging to the evangelical Zionist movement, the memory of the fight of Christian conservatives against communists, or as a way to add yet another reason to justify their hate for the Obama administration. After 2008, the boundary between the political speech of Copts from the diaspora and the Egyptian domestic press became less rigid. A few newspapers such as *Al-Masry al-Youm* or *Al-Youm al-Sabe'a* have published op-eds and articles from Coptic activists in the United States. The Coptic diaspora capacity to shape U.S. policy toward Egypt or Egyptian policy toward Copts, however, remained very limited.

### **Redefining a strategy in a polarized context**

In the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution, a few attempts were made in the Egyptian diaspora to build transfaith organizations that would promote political and economic rights and equal citizenship rather than focus on the grievances of one specific community. The Egyptian-American Rule of Law Association (EARLA), the Ad Hoc Coalition to Defend the Egyptian Revolution, and the American-Egyptian Strategic Alliance are examples of such initiatives (Kuşcu, 2012, p. 133). But the immediate post-revolution enthusiasm for transfaith activism didn't last long. For Copts in the diaspora and Copts in Egypt, the revolution of January 25, 2011, and the coup of July 3, 2013, have had two major impacts on the condition of Egyptian Copts: an unquestionable rise of sectarian violence and an increased publicity of the issue of Coptic rights. Even though sectarianism is far from a new issue in Egyptian political history, almost all Coptic activists, whatever their differences in terms of political preferences, seem to agree that sectarianism has drastically increased. They all blame the policy implemented by former president Morsi for this worsening of their security. They resent Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) for resorting to a very divisive discourse and for their attempt at offering them a regime of protection that basically resembled the millet partnership (Sedra, 2012, September 13). The explanation given for the rise of sectarianism varies. Most Copts evoke the "Islamist vendetta" launched by MB supporters against Copts in retaliation for their assumed support for Sissi. Members of the Maspero Youth Union (MYU) put more emphasis on the responsibility of the government, the Ministry of Interior, and the police. The MYU is a loose coalition of

young Coptic activists born after the revolution, in the Spring 2011, named after a protest that took place outside the Maspero State Television building. The MYU protests against the violence against Copts but also advocates equal citizenship and independence from the Church authority. Other analysts underline the enduring weight of social relations and customs. Two new phenomena have particularly worried Copts about their future in Egypt, the increase of forced evacuations and of blasphemy charges (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 2013). After 2011, violence against Copts in Egypt has kept growing, with mob violence, the burning of churches, and accusations of blasphemy. Forced evacuations from villages have also become more common, due to mob violence after various conflicts between Muslim and Coptic individuals that often start with a disagreement over very mundane issues (S. Tadros, 2014).

If their evaluation of Sissi's rule varies, Copts usually refrain from openly criticizing the military for fear that a destabilization of the fragile status quo may render their situation even worse. Nonetheless, most Coptic intellectuals and activists acknowledge that they do not believe the new regime will contribute to an improvement of their status either. They see the new constitution as reinforcing the status quo rather than as planting seeds for change. They continue to assess rather negatively the strategy of the Obama administration and show more sympathy toward Republican politicians. The words of Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann, during her September 2013 trip to Egypt, in support of the military and the Copts, and against the Muslim Brotherhood, were very well received by the Coptic communities. In spite of all this, many Copts continue to see the 2011 revolution as a positive event that opened up a new space for political discussion and that gave a much bigger visibility to the Coptic issue. The gap between the diaspora and Copts in Egypt has narrowed. Whereas, before 2011, Coptic groups living in the United States were much more vocal than their coreligionists in Egypt, now Copts in both places vehemently denounce violence and discrimination.

While Copts in both the United States and Egypt have become more vocal, Coptic organizations in the diaspora are still in the process of defining their identity and of refining their strategy to get access and influence. The context, though, does not seem in favor of an immediate increase in the influence of American Coptic organizations. The two main sources of leverage they had before 2008 and 2010 have disappeared. This leverage used to be based on (a) the interventionist rationale of a forced democratization of the Middle East, promoted by neoconservatives during the Bush administration and (b) the illusion that Mubarak cared about Western public opinion and would defend human rights. Under the Obama administration, Coptic organizations in the United States have found much less interest in supporting their agenda. As for Sissi, he has shown no interest in U.S. public opinion. In this context, American Coptic organizations have chosen to consolidate their alliance with conservative groups and to build alliances with other Arab Christian associations. These alliances tend to strengthen their anti-Islamist and pro-Sissi rhetoric.

The anti-Islamist and promilitary turn was visible in the last two annual conferences held by Coptic Solidarity, in June 2013 and June 2014. Speakers at these events included Lebanese-American “expert” on terrorism and anti-Islamist Walid Phares; former head of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Nina Shea; and right-wing senator Ted Cruz. Presentations addressed the reality of the rise of sectarian violence and discrimination against Copts, but they also proposed very general and alarmist images of the treatment of women and ethnic minorities in the Muslim world. All speakers condemned the lack of leadership and strategy of the West and of the Obama administration. Most of the remarks made at these conferences suggest that solely responsible for the persecution are the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists. No mention of the social, structural, and legal aspects of discriminations was made, and the state apparatus was never identified as a perpetrator of violence. In other words, the Coptic issue was mostly defined as an ideological matter, based on the genuine and essentialized hatred of all Islamists toward Copts. Rep. Frank Wolf, a long-time supporter of the cause of Copts, called the members of the Coptic diaspora to unite with other minorities, such as the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Ahmedi, and the Bahai. “It’s not enough, he said, to do meetings and op-eds. You have to take this into the political arena.” He also cited the Jewish American community as a model of efficient and united political action. This call lumps together, in an odd manner, the Eastern Syriac Catholic Church, led by the Patriarch of Babylon, based in Baghdad, with the Ahmadiyya, an Islamic religious movement founded in British India at the end of the 19th century, and the Bahai faith, a monotheistic faith that emphasizes the unity of all humanity and that was founded in Persia at the end of the 19th century.

The strategy of transfaith alliance among Christian minorities found an expression in the creation in 2013 of the organization In Defence of Christians (IDC), that presents itself as a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that seeks to raise awareness among policy makers of the persecution of Middle East Christians. The controversy that broke out in September 2014 about IDC’s first congress shows how the politicization of the issue of Middle East Christianity and its appropriation by American conservative politicians may actually harm the cause of Middle East Christians. Two events sparked the polemic about IDC. A week before the first congress, an article published in the Lebanese newspaper *L’Orient Le Jour* on August 28, 2014, revealed that an important funder of the organization was Gilbert Chaghouri, a Lebanese millionaire businessman based in Nigeria famous for his close ties with pro-Assad Lebanese political actors. The implication of Chaghouri in IDC cast doubt on the agenda of the organization and raised suspicions that the whole conference was actually a cover up to promote the paradigm of “the alliance of minorities” against Sunni Islam defended by Bashar Al Assad and vehemently rejected in Lebanon by the 14 March Coalition. Members of IDC immediately protested against these accusations and insisted on the fact that the organization was interested only in raising awareness against the threat to Christians (Zogby, 2014). The keynote speech given by Senator Ted Cruz at the dinner organized by IDC on

September 12 triggered the other major scandal about IDC. When Ted Cruz contended that Israel was the best ally of Middle East Christians, he was booed by a large part of the audience. When, in response to this reaction, Ted Cruz insinuated that the Christians from the Middle East were anti-Semite, he alienated an even bigger part of the audience and caused the departure of Patriarch Laham, the spiritual leader of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. In other words, the alliance between organizations from the Middle East Christian diaspora and American conservatives comes with a cost for both sides. It also shows how conservative groups and politicians ignore the complexity of Middle East Christianity.

Even though the main conferences organized by Arab Christian organizations in the United States often serve to showcase the alliance with conservatives and proponents of anti-Islamist rhetoric, the views and strategies of supporters and members of these groups are getting more and more diverse. Moreover, these groups know how to adjust their message depending on the audience they target. Rallies gathering former Muslims testifying of the violence of Muslim vigilantes against Copts and converts to which controversial figures such as former priest Abuna Zakaria Boutros (known for his fierce critiques of Islam and the Quran) are invited are often aimed mainly at an American audience. Copts are more likely to attend more-moderate gatherings in which people speak to the struggles of Copts without denigrating Muslims *per se*. Anti-Arab prejudice still largely disseminated in Western media contributes to maintaining a certain degree of interreligious and inter-ethnic solidarity among Arab-Americans from different backgrounds. The members of the board of Coptic solidarity actually hold a range of views that is much wider than those expressed at the annual conferences of 2013 and 2014. Likewise, IDC has attracted a great variety of activists, politicians, and scholars, some of them being genuinely interested in defending the rights of Christians in the Middle East. The politicization of the issue of Middle Eastern Christianity and its appropriation by conservatives in the United States is only one part of the story.

Some leaders of American Coptic groups have decided to give up their lobbying activity in the United States and have gone back to Egypt after the revolution. Michael Mounir, who founded the U.S. Copts Association in 1996 and was a key actor in the lobbying for the adoption of IRFA, decided to go back to Egypt after 2010, where he founded a political party, *al haya* (Life). His departure is a response to the opinion, now largely shared among Coptic activists in the United States, that it is not advantageous to have links with U.S. administration and that the U.S. government cannot be trusted any more. The best way to act is from Egypt. According to this view, only the Egyptian state and the new pope Tawadros II can be trusted. A strong supporter of the coup—that he insists on calling a “revolution”—M. Mounir describes Copts’ situation as a systematic persecution rather than as a mere violation of rights. However, he claims that his party is open to people of all faiths and that it seeks to defend the rights of all minorities, such as Shia and atheists. He uses the term *minority* descriptively but refuses the notion that Copts should be protected as such. On the contrary, he advocates for their recognition as

equal citizens with full rights. If he acknowledges that religious freedom has not improved yet in Egypt, he is thankful to the military regime for the return of security.

Although the gap between Copts in the United States and in Egypt has narrowed after 2011, differences have persisted in the level of hatred for the Muslim Brotherhood and in the level of support for Sissi. Right after the January Revolution, Copts in Egypt criticized the radicalism of some activists of the diaspora. The role of Maurice Sadek in the promotion of the “Innocence of Muslims” was also widely criticized. Even though both communities now agree on the fact that the demise of Morsi has afforded a return to security and social cohesion that is beneficial for Copts, they assess very differently the nature of Sissi’s regime. While Michael Mounir underlines the important role of Copts from the diaspora in “countering the Muslim Brotherhood propaganda” aimed at presenting the events of June–July 2013 as a “coup,” members of the Maspero Youth Union have a more qualified judgment. They emphasize the role of the Coptic diaspora in raising awareness and spreading information, but they are also more critical of their full endorsement of the military regime. For example, they are critical of the very warm and positive welcome they prepared to Sissi during his visit in New York for the U.N. general summit in September 2014.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have shown how the 2011 revolution in Egypt, followed by the two successive regimes of the Muslim Brotherhood and the military-based rule of Sissi, have created major changes in the organization and strategy of Coptic organizations in the United States. Relatively inexperienced in political lobbying, and quite unknown from the American public in the 1970s, Coptic organizations have become more mainstream and have grown more open to the idea of building large transfaith coalitions with other Arab Christians in the United States. Copts’ alliance with conservative politicians in the United States goes back to the 1990s. It has been reinforced by what Copts perceive as a lack of interest from the Obama administration for the issue of minorities. However the arrival of a younger generation in Coptic activism and the renewed connection with Copts in Egypt and their reality has also contributed to the diversification of points of view and the emergence of more complex, rich, and nuanced analyses, notably from Egyptian American experts of Coptic descent, who write about Copts but don’t define Coptism as their sole identity (e.g., Michael Wahid Hanna at the Century Foundation, Samuel Tadros at Hudson Institute, and Adel Iskandar). Coptic organizations in the United States remain fragmented and centered around key historical figures, but they are also undergoing a process of rapid professionalization and of political learning, with some activists now invested in building long-term relations with other Middle Eastern Christian organizations, or with Copts in Egypt. Like Copts in Egypt, American Copts have adopted a

strategy of cautious waiting, in a dramatic context in which sectarian violence against Christians rises in Egypt and in the entire Middle East. Copts, in the United States as in Egypt, have to balance different emotions in the definition of their strategy: the vivid memory of the Maspero massacre; resentment toward what they see as a retaliation from the Muslim Brotherhood for Copts' initial support to Sissi; the realization that, despite the return of some degree of security and social cohesion, the space for political expression and action is shrinking. In Egypt and in the United States, Copts seem to be prisoners of highly polarized political scenes. While the space for middle ground and for a dialogue between Islamists and non-Islamists (whatever their religion) seems to have disappeared for the moment from Egypt, polarization is, ironically, also an enduring trait of American politics. The structural polarization of American politics, whereby any topic comes to exist only through the lens of the left/right divide, does not make the work of Middle East Christian organizations any easier. Commenting on the Ted Cruz fiasco at IDC, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douhat perfectly summarized this predicament, when he said that Middle East Christians are too Christian for the left and too foreign for the right.

The political left in the West associates Christian faith with dead white male imperialism ... And in the Middle East the Israel-Palestine question, with its colonial overtones, has been the left's great obsession, whereas the less ideologically convenient plight of Christians under Islamic rule is often left untouched ... Then, finally, there is the American right, where one would expect those interests to find a greater hearing. But the ancient churches of the Middle East (Eastern Orthodox, Chaldean, Maronites, Copt, Assyrian) are theologically and culturally alien to many American Catholics and evangelicals. And the great cause of many conservative Christians in the United States is the state of Israel, toward which many Arab Christians harbor feelings that range from the complicated to the hostile. (Douhat, 2014)

In this context it's important to refrain from too quickly condemning or condoning the strategy of Middle East Christian lobbies in the United States. Despite its traditional unease with religion, the academic and political left should try to invest and appropriate this discussion. Its engagement with this issue could contribute to the elaboration of a much-needed new vocabulary that better accounts for the complex reality of sectarian violence and interreligious relations in the Middle East. As shown by Mariz Tadros, the unease of Western academics and intellectuals from the left have been reluctant to comment on the grievances of Christians in the Middle East, for fear of coming across as supporters of the American hegemonic project or of Islamophobic networks.

There is a fear among some that appearing to be defending religious pluralism in the middle east would be equated with the American hegemonic project, often perceived to be strongly aligned with right wing Christian lobby groups. However, it is precisely the role of the US in aligning, supporting and nurturing militant groups in Libya, Iraq and Syria as a catalyst for the current existential threat to religious diversity in the region that we need to bring to the forefront. There is no longer a "western us" versus the "Muslim

rest”—the entanglements of the US in deals and manoeuvrings with Islamist militants, not least in Libya, Syria and Iraq cannot be overlooked. (M. Tadros, 2015)

Until the terms of the discussion shift, right-wing pundits and politicians will continue adding fuel to the fire by spreading Hollywood-like images and depoliticized narratives of persecution, kidnappings, assaults, and killings.

Unfortunately, in the present context of increased repression in Egypt and of radicalization of the violence perpetrated by ISIS throughout the Middle East, the space for nuanced debate and appraisal of complexity seems to be shrinking every day. Due to the growing insecurity and violence against Copts, the paradigm of persecution and martyrdom has resurfaced. The discourse, promoted notably by the Maspero Youth Union, on equal citizenship and political liberties, and the critique of the authoritarianism of the Coptic clerical leadership over its faithful has been replaced by the more traditional discourse on persecution and the need for special protection by the state (Ezzat, 2015; M. Tadros, 2015). A security pact between President Sissi and the pope Tawadros, echoing the pact between Mubarak and Shenouda, has been formulated to ensure the security of the Copts in exchange for the compliance of the Copts with the new authoritarian regime. But, as shown by Georges Fahmi, the return to the old approach may bring negative consequences. Not only does it further delay the full implementation of full citizenship, it also perpetuates a system of backdoor channels to resolve conflicts about the rights of Copts. But “by encouraging Church members to depend on Coptic leaders to channel their political and social demands, this approach deepens Copts’ isolation and discourages them from joining political parties or movements” (Fahmi, 2015). As a consequence, this perspective “hinders their interaction with other political forces and their integration into civil and political society, leaving Copts engaged only with activities organized by the Church” (Fahmi, 2015). In view of the political developments of Egypt, an important challenge for Coptic organizations in the United States will be to decide whether they want to echo the strategy of the Church or create a pluralistic space for debate and critique of the Sissi regime, and thus risk jeopardizing the precarious security pact between the Church and the state.

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