

Muslim Converts to Christianity Could Die at Hands of Attackers

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Advocates for The Persecuted

Egypt's First Convert from Islam to Christianity to Press for Rights Now Under Severe Pressure, as Islamists Call For His Death.

From Advocates For The Persecuted- by Jan Fletcher

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The situation for Egyptian convert Mohammed Hegazy and his pregnant wife has turned into a prolonged state of crisis, with reports in November that Islamists are distributing Hegazy's picture following Friday prayers at mosques in Port Said and Old Cairo. Adding to the sense of urgency concerning the couple's physical safety is the mid-October attack on Hegazy's former residence by Islamists.

Hegazy is the first Egyptian convert from Islam to Christianity to petition Egypt's Administrative Court to change his religious affiliation on his national identity card. Under Egyptian law, Muslims are not allowed to change religious affiliation, although Christians converting to Islam are typically allowed to change their identity papers to reflect Islam within a day or two.

This is because of the nation's Constitutional Article 2, which says Islam is the Religion of the State, Arabic is its official language, and the principal source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence (Sharia).

Muslims seeking to change their official ID card to reflect Christianity are violating Sharia law, which considers such an action apostasy, and an offense worthy of the death penalty.

According to Compass Direct News, Hegazy ventured out of his secret hiding place in Cairo, with a cap pulled low over his face, to shop for groceries late one night in early November. Despite his precautions, a Christian immediately recognized him, due to the widespread publicity about his case.

In his November 15th article, "In Hiding, Egyptian Convert Continues Fight for Rights"; Peter Lamprecht, a writer for Compass Direct, said the opposition in Egypt had taken Hegazy by surprise:

"When lawyer Mamdouh Nakhla called Hegazy to say that he had filed the convert's case and arranged an important interview with Agence France-Press, the convert said he went willingly.

"They told me that they would take photos and send them outside Egypt, and that no one in Egypt would know," Hegazy said.

"The next morning, Egyptian papers carried the convert's picture and full story.

"Within days, death threats forced Hegazy into hiding and Nakhla to withdraw," reported Lamprecht, adding that on October 11 Islamist fanatics attacked his previous home in Old Cairo, and burned Hegazy's belongings.

Nakhla withdrew from the case August 7, following provocative publicity about Hegazy's case in the Egyptian press. In a mid-November interview in Cairo, Nakhla said Hegazy's case was missing certain documents necessary to press the legal case.

According to Lamprecht's article, on November 15 Judge Muhammad Husseini adjourned Hegazy's case until January 15, "giving Hegazy time to acquire proof that Egypt's Civil Status Department had rejected his request to change the religious designation on his ID."

Nakhla is a well-known human rights attorney in Egypt who is Chairman of Al Kalema (The Word) Center for Human Rights, and his organization has taken on cases involving "reconversion." These are cases in which Christians who formerly converted to Islam are seeking to have their official identity documents changed to once again reflect Christianity as their religious affiliation.

"We have many cases in court of Christians returning after having embraced Islam," said Nakhla. "And, we have many cases concerning equality between Christians and Muslims in other areas of life: Broadcasting programs, prayers, worship — many things."

Three months after withdrawing as Hegazy's attorney, Nakhla said, "We are continuing all the other cases. We are pushing schools to restore the teaching of the Coptic era of Egypt's history. We are pushing the government to remove religion from the national ID card."

Nakhla is also the attorney for an Egyptian blogger, Muhammad Abdul Kareem Nabeel Suleiman, whose arrest and prosecution on Nov. 6, 2006 grabbed world headlines as people demonstrated on his behalf in front of Egyptian embassies. Suleiman was the first blogger in Egypt to receive a prison sentence for insulting Islam. Despite public uproar in other countries, Egypt's legal system sentenced him to a four-year prison term on Feb. 22. Three years of the sentence was for "inciting hatred of Islam," and one year was for insulting Egypt's president. Suleiman initially raised the ire of government officials when he posted his commentary condemning Muslim attacks on Christians in Alexandria.

Some have raised suspicions that Suleiman is currently undergoing torture by Egyptian authorities. According to one report, "Kareem Amer alleges in letters sent from prison in early November 2007 that he was beaten by a prison guard and another inmate under the instruction of an investigation officer at the Borg Alarab prison. Following the incident, in which one of his teeth was reportedly broken, he claims to have been transferred to a disciplinary cell, where he received further beatings and was denied sufficient food and water. The incident follows an allegation of corruption made by Amer against the prison authorities."

Nakhla said, "I was visiting him regularly. Lately I went to visit him in October. I asked permission to visit him and the police denied me permission to visit him."

Conversions and pressure and both growing in Egypt

In an interview immediately following the filing of his petition to have his religious affiliation changed, Hegazy said, "there are thousands of converts" in Egypt. "I went to meetings, conferences where we have thousands," he told a source in Egypt. "It is enough that the government knows there are a large number of converts. It is time to give us our rights."

When asked what he wished to say to Egypt's converts from Islam, he said, "Go out of your ghetto, establish organizations to speak for yourselves and, to defend your rights. The converts are a sub-minority included in the Christian minority. Their rights are violated by everyone. The answer is not to escape or to leave the country, but to fight and struggle for our rights, here in our own country."

Jan Fletcher, executive director of Advocates For The Persecuted, confirmed Hegazy's estimates on the number of converts. "We have received credible reports in Egypt of almost four-dozen leaders of secret groups who are disciplining other converts, some of whom, in turn, will likely assume leadership of yet more secret groups. It is safe to say that presently there are hundreds of secret churches and thousands of converts now living in Egypt and their numbers are increasing at a geometric rate. This movement has the potential to effect a sea change transformation in Egyptian society. We need to encourage Egyptian government leaders to have wisdom and strength to lead Egypt peacefully through this coming transformation, and pray that Egypt will be spared increasing outbreaks of civil violence arising from among the Islamic population against converts and Christians."

In an August 9th article appearing in Egypt's Al-Masaa newspaper, "Members of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Law Specialists agree apostates of Islam are to be counseled; should they refuse they are to be killed," writer Mohammad Omar says:

"Members of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and the Law Specialists have been deeply troubled since being notified of Mohammad Hegazy's case, a resident of Port Said who has converted from Islam to Christianity. Upon hearing of Hegazy's case, faculty members have requested to subject Hegazy under the death sentence according to the Apostate Sharia Law for he has spoken poorly about Islam and was flippant around with the religions. Unless he repents and comes back to his religion by his own will and not under any pressure from anyone, it was stated, the punishment stays…

"Islam is a religion with its fixed rules and fixed facts and so there is no reason to be astonished in regards to the fact that the punishment of apostates lies within the death sentence.

"In perusing the death sentence, the Islam teachers heavily depend on the hadiths such as "who changes his religion, kill him" –a famous hadith found in Al-Bukhari the most accurate of the Sunnah. If one must explain the path in which such a punishment has come about, it is clearly identifiable with the consequences one must deal with should he/she commit a crime against his/her country. Dealing with Apostasy is by accepting the automatic death sentence…

"It is vital to explain an important fact of the Islamic faith – it is by no means a right to play around with the Islamic Doctrines and beliefs. Nor is it a right to expose the Islamic secrets and spread them to the Non-Muslims of the world and the enemies of Islam. Thus, in order to protect the Islamic nation, the legislation of the Apostate Sharia law must take place – for the apostates are cheating not only the Muslims but the non-Muslims of the world." [Click here to read the complete translated article.]

Several sources, who asked not to be named, and who are trying to stave off what they see as a growing likelihood that Hegazy and his wife will fall victim to mob violence in Egypt, say that Hegazy's future survival depends on his ability to leave Egypt. However, one source very close to the situation said Hegazy doesn't want to leave Egypt. The same source said that at the time Hegazy filed his case there were other converts who also wanted to file similar petitions. However, those working to help Muslim converts survive under Egypt's intolerant atmosphere toward apostates pressed them not to petition for a change in religious affiliation at this time.

Hegazy has already suffered arrest and torture by Egyptian police, as do many converts in Egypt. According to the Christian Post Reporter, in an article by Ethan Cole, "Egypt in Uproar Over Christian Convert Case," published August 10, Hegazy "was jailed and tortured in 2002 when police discovered his conversion." Hegazy was only 20 years old at the time.

Based upon information Advocates For the Persecuted has gathered about other converts' arrests by the police, Fletcher said it appears to be common for converts to be arrested and tortured in their late teens and early twenties, following their conversion to Christianity during their youth or young adult years.

This case has so galvanized Islamic sentiments against converts that other Egyptians have also endured threats, attacks on property, and even arrests by the police simply for their peripheral involvement in Hegazy's case. Another attorney said Muslims attempted to destroy his car after he made a public comment on Hegazy's case.

On August 8, a few days after Hegazy's case drew public attention in Egypt, Egyptian police detained Adel Fawzy Faltas and Peter Ezzat, Egyptian representatives of the Middle East Christian Association, following an online interview Faltas conducted with Hegazy shortly before the two were arrested. Although the two were released November 5 -- without an official explanation of why they were jailed for three months -- just days after their release, police arrested three of their association's colleagues on November 12.

According to Compass Direct News, Wagih Yaob and Victor George, of Cairo, and MECA lawyer, Mamdouh Azmy, of Alexandria were arrested and taken into police custody and are being held in Cairo.

A call for action

Just prior to Hegazy's case, on August 1, U.S. Representatives Trent Franks (R-AZ) and Emanuel Cleaver, II (D-MO), co-chairs of the Congressional Task Force on International Religious Freedom, sent a letter to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak calling upon him to address growing religious freedom concerns. In particular, the letter called for the immediate release and pardon of Suleiman.

However, the two congressmen also criticized Egypt's religious defamation law, Article 98(F), under which Soliman was convicted. They say, "such laws violate international human rights standards which protect an individual's right to freedom of religion..."

"...while Egyptian law purportedly protects the three 'heavenly religions'-- Islam, Judaism, and Christianity -- from being attacked or defamed, Mr. Soliman's case proves that not even professing Muslims are safe."

The two congressmen note that Egypt receives around \$2 billion in U.S. aid annually. "Yet, it is increasingly difficult for Americans to maintain support for a government that is stifling the voices that would help sustain its own democracy, while allowing Islamic extremists greater influence over the society -- whether through the police or education systems." [Click here to read the full text of the congressional letter.]

Advocates For The Persecuted urges North Americans who are concerned about human rights in Egypt, and the egregious treatment in Egypt of both Muslim converts to Christianity as well as those who advocate for Christians, to voice concern over these human rights abuses to political representatives in North America and to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Readers can write to Mubarak c/o Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 3521 International Court, NW, Washington DC 20008.

Editor's note: For updates and background on Mohammed Hegazy's case, please see the following links:

January 25, 2008: Tempers Flare into Melee at Egyptian Convert's Hearing

December 4, 2007: Muslim Converts to Christianity Could Die at Hands of Attackers

October 10, 2007: Egyptian Islamists Join Case Against Convert to Christianity

August 9, 2007: Islamic Experts Call for Mohammed Hegazy's Death

August 8, 2007: Egyptian Convert in Hiding After Lawyer Backs Out,

August 5, 2007: Muslim Convert Requests Religion Change on Egypt's ID Card