

Al-Qaeda and Its Role in Fomenting Religious Strife in the Arab World: The Kamilia Shehata Affair

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Introduction

On July 18, 2010, a young Coptic woman from Egypt named Kamilia Shehata, the wife of a Coptic priest named Tadraous Sama'an, disappeared without a trace. About a week later, Egyptian security forces found her in the apartment of a relative and demanded that she explain her disappearance. Shehata told them that she had decided to run away from home because of a domestic dispute. This seemed to put an end to the affair. However, Shehata's explanation for her mysterious disappearance and her absence from public aroused heavy suspicion that the truth was somewhat different, and generated a flurry of gossip that the reason for her disappearance was that she had converted to Islam. According to the rumors, the Egyptian security forces who had succeeded in finding her had agreed to immediately turn her over to the Coptic Church in Egypt, as the matter was an internal one which the Church wished to resolve by itself. One rumor further claimed that the Coptic Church had not taken kindly to Shehata's conversion to Islam, and so decided to imprison her in a convent until she relented and returned to the Christian fold. It is worth noting that the veracity of these rumors, which, as will be detailed below, caused a storm of events as well as a media storm, cannot be confirmed.

Many Muslims in Egypt interpreted the Church's acts as defiance of the hegemony of Islam; they therefore turned out *en masse* to call on the Church to release Shehata and cease kidnapping Christian women who had converted to Islam. The feeble response of the Egyptian regime and the ineffectuality of Al-Azhar,¹ perceived as being the official protector of Islam, only increased existing tensions, leading to more mass protests. This was not the first time the Coptic Church had been blamed in such a way. Wafa Konstantin, another Christian

¹ Supreme Islamic Council for Sunni Islam, engaged in adjudication, interpretation, and promulgation; associated with Cairo's Al-Azhar University, leading center of Islamic scholarship in the Muslim world. – trans.

woman married to an Egyptian priest who had ostensibly decided, in December 2004, to convert to Islam and had then gone missing, was mentioned from the outset in the protests surrounding what came to be known as "the Shehata Affair". According to one rumor, Konstantin was tortured in a church basement in an attempt to get her to repudiate Islam; according to another rumor, she was executed in the Egyptian desert. These rumors, like those surrounding the Shehata Affair, can also not be confirmed.

In any case, the Shehata Affair succeeded in arousing an extensive wave of public protests in Egypt, and led to a massive public relations campaign waged by Muslims through dedicated Web sites,² videos uploaded to the Web,³ and social groups on Facebook.⁴ However, the Shehata Affair was only one more catalyst of religious tensions in Egypt. Several events that preceded the Shehata Affair had also fanned the flames:

1. In August 2010, a ship registered to a Coptic owner was suspected of transporting arms from Israel to one Joseph Boutros Al-Jablawi, son of the manager of the Coptic Patriarchate of Port Said. This increased suspicion that the Coptic Church in Egypt was systematically stockpiling weapons in its monasteries and churches, in preparation for a future conflict with the Muslims.⁵

² See for example <http://camliya.info> and <http://www.kamiliashehata.com> (both in Arabic). For an interview with the person who established the second Web site see *Al-Shorouk*, November 8, 2011, <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=293282> (Arabic).

³ See for example the special channel devoted to Shehata on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/CAMLIAELMOSLMA> (Arabic).

⁴ See for example <http://www.facebook.com/KamiliaShehataWebSite> and <http://www.facebook.com/camliaelmoslma> (both in Arabic).

⁵ *Al-Jazeera*, September 15, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/BE050DC8-80E1-4B69-A181-BE653246D110> (Arabic).

2. On August 17, 2010, in response to the capture of the ship, the "Front for the Ulamaa of Al-Azhar" called for subordination of all monasteries and churches to State regulation, including weapons searches.⁶
3. Al-Anba Bishawi, Secretary of the Holy See and the presumed successor of Coptic Patriarch Baba Shenouda, made the outrageous remark that, "The Copts are the origin of this country...we treat the guests who came and lived here nicely...but we are ready to die as martyrs if anyone touches our Christian message" (September 15, 2010).
4. In an interview with *Al-Jazeera*, Dr. Muhammad Selim Al-Awa, an Islamist, made the equally outrageous remark that, "The Coptic Church is not [merely] a parallel republic in Egypt...it is an empire" (September 15, 2010).⁷



Cairo, July 2010: Muslims demonstrate for the release of Kamilia Shehata and Wafa Konstantin

⁶ For the full text of these remarks, see http://www.jabhaonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=400:2010-08-17-23-18-07&catid=27:2009-10-16-18-46-20&Itemid=65 (Arabic).

⁷ Omar Ashour, "Copts, Brothers, Salafis, and Autocrats: The Alexandria Bombing and Egypt's Unresolved Crisis", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, January 12, 2011, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?article=42285&fa=downloadArticlePDF&lang=en>



Banner from a Web site devoted to the Kamilia Shehata Affair, titled, "Kamilia's Story: A Recurrent Tragedy", <http://camliya.info>



A YouTube channel devoted to Shehata



A sample Facebook page calling for action to free Shehata, <http://www.facebook.com/KamiliaShehataWebSite>

Global Jihad: Another Contributor to Religious Tensions in Egypt

The increase in religious tensions in Egypt played into the hands of Al-Qaeda, which wished to take advantage of it for its own ends. As will be elucidated below, Al-Qaeda has quickly become yet one more cause of this tension. The first comment from Al-Qaeda on the Shehata Affair appeared in early October 2010, in an audio tape made available by the Jihadist propaganda outlet *As-Sahab* in which Osama Bin Laden discussed global warming, agriculture, and natural disasters. Although bin Laden did not make notable mention of either the Shehata Affair or the religious tensions in Egypt during the recording, a black slide did appear at the end of it, bearing the text: "Who will protect Wafa Konstantin and Kamilia Shehata and their sisters? Where are the young Muslim men fanatically devoted to [protecting] Muslim women?". The following also appeared, in red letters: "Who will burn their churches and slaughter their priests?" – a threat that would assume murderous proportions in the coming months. This, it seems, was the first sign of Al-Qaeda's new strategic plan.

Therefore, this article will examine Al-Qaeda's role in the religious tension between the Muslim majority and Christian minorities in Egypt, and the considerations that have motivated Al-Qaeda to play this role.



The text that followed an audio recording made available by Al-Qaeda in early October 2010, in which the organization first addressed religious tensions in Egypt

Late September and early October 2010 saw an increase in the number of official Jihadist publications and threads on Jihadist forums devoted to the Coptic Church in Egypt⁸ and the Shehata Affair, and to a re-examination of the status of Christian minorities in Islamic lands. **It appears that these posts were attempting to prepare the religious-legal groundwork, and public opinion, to justify violent acts against Christians in Islamic lands, especially Egypt, and thereby to both prevent a recurrence of similar provocations by the Christian minority and secure the release of Shehata.**

On October 4, 2010, a series of questions and answers were published on the Salafi Web site Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad,⁹ which addressed religious opposition to the Christians in Egypt following the Wafa Konstantin-Kamilia Shehata Affair. One visitor to the site asked, "According to Islamic law, is it permissible to harm Egyptian priests who try to convert Muslims to Christianity and who kidnap our sisters who have converted to Islam?" This visitor also asked whether Christians in Muslim lands were eligible to be considered "Ahl al-Dhimma" – that is, to be designated "protected peoples" or "guaranteed citizens", a status accorded Jews and Christians in Muslim lands since the dawn of Islam, which ensured protection of life and property in exchange for adherence to several conditions, such as paying a per capita tax to the ruler – or, conversely, whether they could be killed.

⁸ The Coptic Church has between 6,000,000-11,000,000 adherents in Egypt, out of a total population of 80,000,000. An additional 6,000 Copts live in Germany, 6,000 live in The Netherlands, and 45,000 live in France.

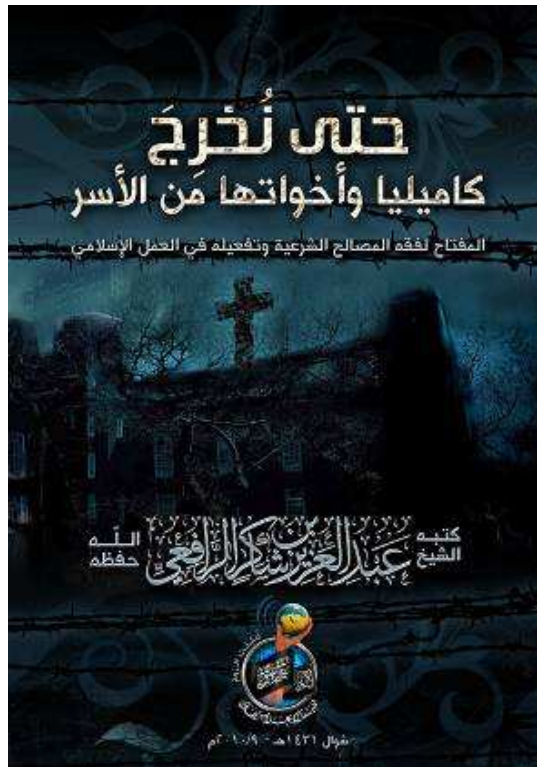
⁹ The site is an immense repository of Jihadist literature. It is also possible to obtain a religious-legal (Shari'a) ruling by addressing questions to the site's Shari'a Council, established by Salafi Jihadist Sheikh Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, the spiritual father of Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi (former leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and among the most venerable Salafi and Jihadist sheikhs in Jordan. He is currently serving time in a Jordanian prison on a charge of having aided Chechen mujahedeen. For a further explication of the nature of this Web site and its Shari'a Council, see Joas Wagemakers, "Protecting Jihad: The Sharia Council of the Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, Summer 2011, pp. 148-162.

Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shanqiti, a member of the site's Shari'a Council, responded thus: "These Christians have no contract with us nor any protection from us. Their blood, property and money are permitted to [be taken by] Muslims. This is the way to act toward one who vexes you: those who attack you, attack them in kind. These Christians, as you describe them, are fair game." Al-Shanqiti added that he wished to "...note two additional points. First, anyone who wants to commit an act of Jihad should join a Jihadist organization, and not act in a way that is independent and not coordinated with the plans of the mujahedeen. Second, it is recommended that the mujahedeen follow a defined strategy and plan, and avoid improvisation and retaliation. However, if the mujahedeen have an opportunity to punish those who have directly harmed, or incited to harm, Islam or Muslims – well then, their acts are a victory, Islam's retribution, and we ask Allah to accept those who perform such deeds."¹⁰

On **October 6, 2010**, a Jihadist propaganda organ calling itself the Jihad Media Elite, which is active on Jihadist Web sites, published a 14-page article by an unknown author, Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz bin Shaker Al-Rafi'i, titled, "Until Kamilia and Her Sisters Are Released from Captivity: The Key of Shari'a Interests [Fiqh al-Masalih] and Its Implementation in Islamic Acts". In it, Al-Rafi'i stresses the religious obligation to aid a Muslim in distress, adding that harm to a Muslim by a non-Muslim is considered an affront to Islam. Thus, the harm to Konstantin and Shehata perpetrated by Christians is tantamount to harm to Islam. The obligatory "aid" could be proffered in the form of protests and demonstrations – although Al-Rafi'i sees these as insufficient, compared to killing for Allah, assassinating or kidnapping Christian oppressors. Al-Rafi'i thus indicates that

¹⁰ Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shanqiti, "Freeing the Women Prisoners [from] Christian Churches," *Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, October 4, 2010, http://www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=3190 (Arabic).

militant acts are a legitimate means of "aiding" the Muslim sisters and the Prophet's religion.¹¹



The cover of the article, "Until Kamilia and Her Sisters Are Released from Captivity"

Participants in Jihadist forums discussed the Shehata Affair with great intensity. On September 16, 2010, one member of the Jihadist forum Atahadi called on his brethren to take revenge on the Coptic Church for its treatment of Shehata and other women converts to Islam in Egypt.¹²

On September 24, 2010, a member of the Jihadist forum Ansar Al-Mujahedeen posted a list of more than 50 Coptic officials who supposedly had played some role in the denigration of Islam. Najib Sawiris, for example, an affluent Egyptian Coptic businessman, was accused of propagating anti-Islamic propaganda warning against the spread of Islam. Subsequently, this forum member called for

¹¹ October 6, 2010, <http://www.as-ansar.net/vb/showthread.php?t=30072> (Arabic).

¹² September 16, 2010, <http://www.atahadi.com/vb/showthread.php?t=28669> (Arabic).

a boycott of the companies that did business with Sawiris. Coptic organizations active outside of Egypt, such as the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights headed by Midhat Qilada and active in Switzerland, were similarly cited.¹³



Midhat Qilada



Najib Sawiris

Under the heading, "Al-Qaeda Calls on Muslims to Aid Kamilia Shehata," one member of the Jihadist forum Shumukh Al-Islam wondered, given these threats: "Has the Jihad begun in Egypt?". According to this member, calls by leading Jihadists to rescue Shehata raised speculation as to whether Al-Qaeda was planning a terrorist attack and whether the Shehata Affair heralded a new stage of Jihad on Egyptian land. He concluded his post with a warning: "O, Christians of Egypt, wait! Al-Qaeda has declared a merciless war against you...wait and see!..."¹⁴

¹³ September 24, 2010, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=29289> (Arabic).

¹⁴ October 30, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=78174> (Arabic).

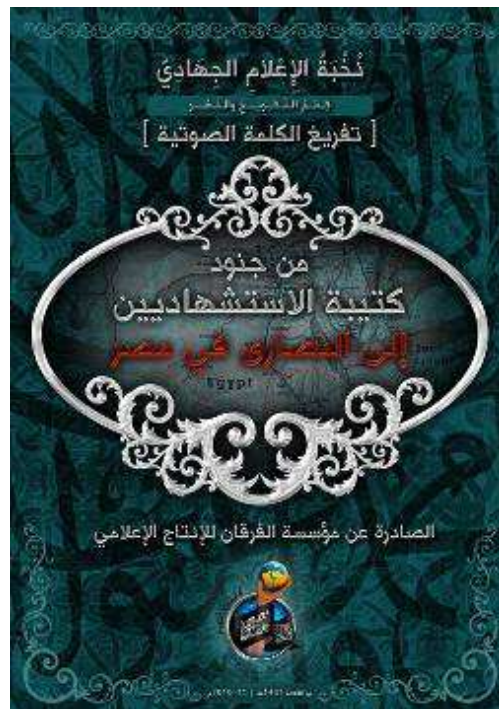
The Attack on the Church in Baghdad, October 31, 2010

Threats of harm to Christian officials and churches were also leveled in Iraq, by the "Islamic State of Iraq", Al-Qaeda's arm in that country. On **October 31, 2010**, several members of that organization invaded an Assyrian Catholic Church, Our Lady of Salvation, in the Al-Karada neighborhood of Baghdad, taking hostage all of the worshippers, including the priest. That same day, the Islamic State of Iraq issued a warning: "The mujahideen of the Islamic State of Iraq give the bellicose Christian Church and its infidel leader a 48-hour stay to clarify that status of our sisters in religion, who are incarcerated in the heretic-convent-prisons and polytheistic churches of Egypt, to free them all, and to place an announcement in the media to that effect, which will reach the mujahideen by the end of this [ultimatum]." The Islamic State of Iraq also called on Christian leaders and churches everywhere, and international Christian organizations, to pressure the Christian Church in Egypt to meet their demands; failing that, they would execute the Iraqi Christian hostages being held in the Baghdad church and attack other Christians in and outside of Iraq.¹⁵ Six hours after the Islamic State of Iraq had published its ultimatum, the Jihadist propaganda organ Al-Furqani published, another message similar to the first one, titled "From the Soldiers of the Martyrs Brigade to the Christians in Egypt". It demanded that the Christians in Egypt immediately release Kamilia Shehata, Wafa Konstantin and other Muslim women captives, in exchange for the hostages in the church in Iraq. It also called upon the Vatican to pressure the Coptic Church to meet these demands, lest the hostages be executed within 48 hours of the ultimatum and more Christians and churches in Egypt, in Al-Shams and other areas of the region, be harmed.¹⁶

¹⁵ October 31, 2010, <http://majahden.com/vb/showthread.php?t=10473> (Arabic).

¹⁶ November 1, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=78473> (Arabic).

Ultimately, the ultimatum was not complied with. Instead, Iraqi security forces stormed the church in an attempt to free the hostages and kill the terrorists. However, their rescue effort failed when the terrorists detonated their suicide belts, killing 44 people (37 worshippers and 7 members of the security forces) and wounding tens more.



Cover page of Al-Furqani's message, "From the Soldiers of the Martyrs Brigade to the Christians in Egypt"

Al-Qaeda's Considerations in Fomenting Religious Strife

What motivated Al-Qaeda to threaten the Christian minority in Muslim lands? What political gain could be had from doing so? Analysis of available information indicates that several factors may have led Al-Qaeda and the global Jihad movement to adopt this strategy:

1. A desire to reinforce the image of Al-Qaeda as the protector of Islam and the Muslims, and thereby increase the popularity of global Jihad and win popular support.
2. A chance to use the Shehata Affair to pluck at Muslim heart-strings in the hope gaining new recruits to the cause and establishing a new front in Egypt – especially given the failed attempt to do so in the past.¹⁷
3. An opportunity to fan the flames of fanaticism and religious conflict between Muslims and Copts, thereby destabilizing Egypt.
4. A chance to paint an attack on Christian minorities in Islamic lands – who in any case are identified by Al-Qaeda as being “Western” and a fifth column acting in the West’s interest – as an attack on the West, its interests, and its plans for the Middle East.
5. A desire to influence the elections in Egypt slated for November 2010: the Egyptian “man in the street” could interpret the regime’s failure to address religious conflict as weakness and an inability to ensure the safety of all Egyptians.
6. The chance for an “easy score”: Christians in Islamic lands are perceived as being a relatively easy target, since they are not organized into armed militias (as are the Shiites in Iraq, for example) and are not likely to either launch a preemptive strike or retaliate.

¹⁷ In 2006, it apparently became possible for Muhammad Khalil al-Hukaymah, a former member of the Egyptian Jihad movement, to establish a branch of Al-Qaeda in Egypt, to be known as “Al-Qaeda in the Land of Egypt” (Al-Qaeda fi Ard Al-Kinana). However, this brief episode was quickly over. In August 2008, Al-Hukaymah was killed in an American drone strike in the tribal areas of Pakistan. (Al-Qaeda officially announced his death only in 2010, and without naming a new Emir of Al-Qaeda in Egypt.) Thus ended the hope of establishing an Islamic organization associated with Al-Qaeda in Egypt. For more information on Al-Qaeda’s presence in Egypt, see “Al-Qaeda’s Other Face: ‘Al-Qaeda in the Land of Egypt’, a Plan that Fizzled Before It Ignited,” *Al-Hayat* (London), September 28, 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/185506> (Arabic).

The responses on Jihadist Web sites to the terrorist attack in Iraq were mostly favorable. One member of the Jihadist forum Shumukh Al-Islam justified the attack, based on Sheikh Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shanqiti 's ruling that it is permissible to kill Christians in all Islamic lands, as they are no longer considered "protected peoples" (see above). Moreover, Christian minorities are accused of having spread secular principles and heretical beliefs since the early 20th century. According to the person responsible for this post, the Christians are "The West's bridge to Islamic lands. And so they have become a fifth column and a poisoned dagger piercing Muslims and their countries...".¹⁸ A few forum participants claimed that the Christian minorities of the Middle East should not be harmed. For example, one member of the Jihadist forum Shumukh Al-Islam wrote that Islam's real fight is against Western Christian and Jewish nations, whereas the Christians in Islamic lands maintain neutrality and so should be left alone.¹⁹

Continued Threats against Christian Minorities in Islamic Countries

Despite the wave of international condemnation of the attack in Baghdad, Jihadist officials and members of Jihadist forums continued to publish threats against Christian minorities in Islamic countries. On **December 10, 2010**, the Jihadist, Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Yakin media center [Markaz Al-Yakin] published an announcement titled, "Shenouda:²⁰ Bow Your Head, *Dhimi* [protected vassal]! Take Care Lest the Days of Peace Pass You By". In it, the Islamic State of Iraq raged against the Christians for having failed to meet its demand that they free the women converts to Islam, and threatened to act if they continued to ignore

¹⁸ November 2, 2011, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=78668> (Arabic).

¹⁹ November 3, 2011, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=78904> (Arabic).

²⁰ Baba [Pope] Shenouda III is the Coptic Pope, Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, Egypt. – trans.

this demand. The announcement further stated that the Christians who had remained silent would have to choose between one of two options offered by the Islamic State of Iraq:

1. Any Christian leader, church or organization anywhere in the world with any brains at all would pressure the Christian Church in Egypt to release the jailed Muslim women.
2. If the Christians of Egypt continue with their deeds, then "The Ministry of War of the Islamic State of Iraq [will] decree all Christian centers, organizations and agencies, their leaders and adherents, a legitimate target for the mujahedeen wherever they may be within [the mujahedeen's] reach. Let it be known to these adherents, chief among them the sham despot of the Vatican, that the killing sword will never be lifted from the necks of their faithful, until they disavow the deeds of the dogs of the Christian Church", and until the mujahedeen free the captive Muslim women.

The Christians were warned to heed these words in earnest and cease thinking that the weapons stockpiled in their churches and monasteries would protect them, as the soldiers of the Islamic State of Iraq knew when and how to act.²¹



A banner that appeared on Jihadist Internet forums, summarizing the Islamic State of Iraq's announcement

²¹ December 10, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=84125> (Arabic).

The Christian Minority in Islamic Countries as Reflected in the Jihadist Periodical *Sada Al-Jihad*

On **December 17, 2010**, the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) published an edition of the periodical *Sada Al-Jihad* (Number 37), which was devoted to the Christian minority in Egypt, in light of the Kamilia Shehata Affair. Since this periodical is produced under the aegis of the Al-Qaeda's central leadership, it is worth paying attention to the themes arising from it and the dialog it wished to prompt. **Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi**, the Emir of a group of Palestinian Salafi Jihadists from the Gaza Strip known as Jama'at Al-Tawhid wal-Jam'aa, and a member of the Shari'a Council of the Salafi Jihadist Web site Minbar Al-Tawhid, wrote an article titled, "From Wafa to Kamilia...Important Stances", which was also posted on several Jihadist forums on January 9, 2011.²² He draws a number of conclusions from the Shehata Affair:

1. The freedom of worship and civil rights preached in the West are for Christians only, and are not granted to Muslims at all. In effect, the Christians in Egypt are neither tolerant nor understanding of Kamilia's conversion to Islam, pursuant to freedom of worship and civil rights, but rather are using illegitimate means to pressure her to renounce her conversion.
2. The Christian minority in Egypt presents itself as an oppressed and downtrodden minority, discriminated against by a Muslim majority that purportedly tramples its rights. However, in reality, the actions of the Christians against the Muslims prove differently, exposing the Christians' lies. In effect, the people of Egypt are divided in two: the oppressed and deprived Muslim Nation, divested of its civil rights and even denied its humanity; and

²² January 9, 2011, <http://www.al-jahafal.com/vb/showthread.php?t=16019> (Arabic); <http://ansar-dawlat-aliraq-alislamyah.net/vb/showthread.php?p=15570&posted=1> (Arabic).

the Christian Nation, which benefits from full civil rights and behaves toward the Muslims as it pleases.

Moreover, the Christian minority in Egypt is turning its churches and monasteries into weapons caches, in preparation for slaughtering the Muslims, as happened in Bosnia, Indonesia, Nigeria and elsewhere. This is proven by the discovery of the arms ship sent by the Jewish State to the Church in Egypt. According to Al-Maqdisi, "Today we see this minority, which dons a mantle of oppression, infiltrating, kidnapping and murdering anyone who opposes the rules of the Church". Furthermore, one of [the Church's] senior officials dares to speak openly against the government and disregard its decisions. Thus, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Christians have gone from being a protected people (Ahl Al-Dhimma) since the earliest days of Muslim rule in Egypt to being fighters, from being weak to being daring, and from being meek to being arrogant tyrants. In other words, the situation as it once was been reversed, such that today, the Muslims are those who must fight for their rights and seek justice. Yet in truth, none are willing to hear [the Muslims].

3. Muslims, particularly in Egypt, live in squalor and unimaginable poverty. They have been brought low by their willingness to make do with less and make concessions to a tyrannical regime that has allied itself with the Crusader forces. Therefore, the Muslims must change this situation, reclaim their honor, and proudly bear the standard of Islam. In other words, according to Al-Maqdisi, improving the image of the Muslims and strengthening their status in society will deter the Christian minority from acting as if it rules Egypt.

4. The Egyptian security forces oppress and wield an iron hand against the Muslim population only, on the pretense that they are guarding State security. For example, Al-Maqdisi claims that the security forces would most likely not hesitate to break into a mosque if it were learned that there were weapons inside. He claims this proves that the regime is despotic, collaborates with the infidels, and is largely responsible for the ills of the country.
5. The Ulamaa²³ in Egypt headed by Al-Azhar have failed their mandate to guard the principles of Islam, preferring instead to support the regime and the Christians, rather than calling on people to wave the banner of Jihad to eradicate polytheism and free Kamilia and the other Muslim women prisoners.²⁴



“From Wafa to Kamilia...Important Stances”

²³ Muslim scholars and arbiters of Shari’a (religious law). – trans.

²⁴ Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi, “From Wafa to Kamilia...Important Stances”, *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:23-25), December 2010. The article was first posted on the Salafi Jihadist portal *Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* established by Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, one of the founders of the Salafi Jihadist community in Jordan.

Another author, **Muhammad bin Zayd Al-Muhajir**, sees the Shi'ites, Egypt's Christians, and some American priests as one entity which works together to attack Islam. Thus, according to Al-Muhajir, Father Al-Anba Bishawi, the second-most important official in the Coptic Church (Secretary to the Metropolitan and the presumed successor to the Coptic Patriarch, Baba Shenouda), has dared to openly criticize the Qur'an. Al-Muhajir sees the Shehata Affair as proof that the Christians of Egypt are bent on war. Even more damning, to his mind, is the danger to Islam posed by the division of Sudan into two countries, one Muslim (in the north) and the other Christian (in the south). Al-Muhajir claims that the establishment of a Christian nation in South Sudan serves the interests of the Christian world and is liable to be a point of departure for the dissemination of Christianity throughout Africa and the Islamic lands, with the support of the West and the tacit acquiescence of Arab and Muslim countries. In other words, according to Al-Muhajir, Islam is under existential threat because of the plots and intrigues of the Christians, whether in the West or in Islamic lands.²⁵

Another article, by **Usama Al-Makki**, protests the response of the official Ulamaa in Egypt to the Shehata Affair. He claims that they blindly supported the policy of the government, which backed the Christians. In addition, the Ulamaa's use of the Treaty of Hudaibiya (a treaty signed by the Prophet Muhammad with the Qurayish tribe of Mecca, which initiated a peace that lasted for ten years) as a precedent for supporting the actions of the Church is invalid. Al-Makki cites the following reasons for finding fault with the Ulamaa's ruling that the Church's actions were legal:

1. After the signing of the Hudaibiya Treaty, the Prophet Muhammad forbid the return to the infidel of women converts to Islam.

²⁵ Muhammad bin Zayd Al-Muhajir, "The Mother of the Believers: Between the Curses of the Shi'ites...and the Silence of the Frustrated", *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:27), December 2010 (Arabic).

2. The Prophet Muhammad knew that Allah wished to secure the well-being of the believers. It was therefore not possible to hand them over to unbelievers.
3. There is no agreement or treaty between Muslims and Christians.
4. Even if there were such an agreement or treaty, it would still be forbidden to hand Muslim women over to infidel unbelievers.

According to Al-Makki, the Christians in Egypt defy convention in daring to attack Islam. They may therefore be killed and their property confiscated or destroyed; as such, he claims that this is the time for deeds and not words. Al-Makki urges Muslims to use the power of the sword to free the Muslim women supposedly imprisoned in the basements of convents in Egypt.²⁶



"Shenouda: Bow Your Head..."

²⁶ Abu Usama Al-Makki, "Kamilia and the Hudaibiya Treaty...Doubts and Responses," *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:28-29) December 2010 (Arabic).



Baba [Pope] Shenouda III, Head of the Coptic Church in Egypt

Another opinion piece titled "The Christians of Egypt: The Crusader Hammer Strikes the Body of the Umma [Muslim Nation]" and written by **Abu Abdullah Anis**, treats the Copts as a fifth column in the service of international Crusader forces. Anis claims the Copts are not descendents of the original residents of ancient Egypt, but rather descend from Christian Crusaders who remained in Egypt, and now deliberately and falsely call themselves "Copts". Anis further claims that the Christians of Egypt are intentionally trying to remove Muslims from positions of influence and limit their freedom in everyday life. Moreover, not only has the demographic number of Copts grown exponentially, but they have succeeded in taking control of politics, the economy and culture.

In politics, they have managed to grab influential positions and key roles in government, and turn to nepotism to resolve their problems. In so doing they, "have become a tool in the hands of the Christian lobby that controls the economy and is supported by the international Church and the international Crusaders and all influential economic institutions." In the economy, they have had significant success. The author presents the following statistics on the companies and businesses owned by Christians in Egypt to support his point:

- 22.5% of the companies founded between 1974 and 1995 are owned by Christians
- 20% of construction businesses are owned by Christians
- 50% of consulting offices are owned by Christians
- 60% of pharmacies are owned by Christians
- 45% of private clinics are owned by Christians
- 73% of the Egyptian employees at foreign embassies are Christians
- 20% of the businessmen are Christians
- Six of the ten richest people in Egypt are Christian, and four of them are considered among the richest people in the world.

In addition, Anis cites the family of Boutros Boutros Ghali as one of the most renowned Christian families in Egyptian politics and economics. According to Anis, Dr. Yousuf Boutros Ghali, for example, served as the Treasurer of Egypt, and filled a range of key positions in the Egyptian economy. Another influential Christian cited by Anis is Najib Sawiris, who in 2008 was cited by *Forbes Magazine* for having a fortune worth \$12.7 billion.

As for culture, Anis claims that Christians use the media, film, theater and various cultural events to influence the younger generation and spread their religion. Anis perceives the annual international book fair held in Cairo to be a "Christian festival, in which more than five million books are pressed on Muslims.." by more than 100 Christian publishing houses. Moreover, Muslims surrender their contact information at the book fair (email address, mobile phone number), which the Christians and their churches then use to monitor and contact them. In other words, this author sees the annual book fair as a festival of missionary activity meant to convert Muslim participants to Christianity.

According to Anis, control of the media and cultural institutions enables the Christians to do the following:

1. Distort the identity of Egyptian society, lead Muslims to debauchery, and promulgate pornography and licentiousness among Muslims, wherever they are, including in their homes and schools.
2. Export movies and plays from Egypt to multiple Islamic countries.

Close Ties and Cooperation with the International Crusader Movement

Anis claims that, "The Christians of Egypt wish for and dream of the day when the Crusaders, led by the US, conquer [Egypt] and come to their aid as did their ancestors in the French campaign against Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte". Until that day comes, the author notes that the US is preparing for a long-term war against the Muslim world, which is meant to stem the flowering of Islam. And since the local and national governments fail to do so, the US is supporting Christians in Muslim lands politically and economically, in the hope that by so doing it will achieve the following aims:

1. "Weakening the Umma's [Muslim nation] ability to oppose Crusader aggression, by divesting the Umma of its principal weapon – that is, Islam; this it does by denying the holiness of, and dishonoring, the Muslims' religion by propagating fictions and lies against the Qur'an and the Prophet and his wives etc., and against visible symbols of Islam such as the Hajj [pilgrimage to Mecca], prayer, and fasting [during Ramadan]."
2. Causing the disintegration of Muslim society by converting Muslims to Christianity and using them in a future fight against the Muslims.
3. Causing a mental breakdown among Muslims through the intensive, focused spread of doubt about Islam and by making it a focus of criticism.

4. Inciting civil war among ethnic and religious groups – that is, between Muslims and minorities, especially the Christian minority – by encouraging those minorities to disparage Muslims, distrust their religion, and spread lies about it.
5. Conducting a war of attrition against the Muslims, thereby distracting their attention from the real war being waged by Crusader forces in the occupied lands, and engaging them in an internal struggle [against Christians] so that the armies of the occupation can progress undisturbed.

The Silence of the Egyptian Government

According to Anis, the Egyptian government clearly prefers the Christian minority to the Muslims, and has therefore taken a number of planned steps to clarify this preference, including the following:

1. Sending the security forces to politically persecute and curtail the actions of the Ulamaa and Muslim preachers, including those at Al-Azhar and the Ministry of the Wakf. Limiting activities in mosques to prayer only, for no more than three hours a day, with security oversight of sermons preached there and at other centers of Islamic opinion.
2. Encouraging secular and liberal groups hostile to Islam. Deliberately drying up the wellsprings of knowledge by persecuting religious leaders and the Ulamaa, leading to an unprecedented spread of ignorance.
3. Conducting a media campaign (television, the press, etc.) promoting hedonism and surrender to life's pleasures. (The author believes this explains why the budgets of the Ministries of Culture and Communications are the next largest after those of the Ministries of the Interior and Defense.)

The Role of the Christians in Egypt in the War against the Spread of Islam

Based on all of the above, Anis claims it is obvious that Christians the world over, in general, and those in Egypt, in particular, aspire to sunder the Muslims from Islam. This trend is not new; it has been extant for thousands of years, thanks to Church-funded organizations and institutions. The author quotes a report published in the US stating that such Christian missionary institutions and organizations number in the thousands. Close to 300 of them are officially active in Egypt, and employ 5,000 Egyptians and 1,500 foreigners, who focus their efforts on universities and schools, clubs and other places young people congregate, and medical centers.

Is There a Tie to the “Zionist Entity”?

According to Anis, there is a close strategic alliance between the Zionist regime and world Christianity. The former are interested in using the influence of the latter to promote their interests in Arab countries, particularly Egypt.

Infinite Aspirations

The author further notes that the Christians in Egypt aspire to divide that country, as happened in Sudan, by infiltrating key roles in the Egyptian government. If the Muslims continue to ignore this situation, keeping silent on the struggled being waged between the Crusader Church and Islam, then ultimately the Christians will fulfill their dream, as they have done in parts of the Philippines, in East Timor (part of Indonesia), in Andalusia and, most recently, in Sudan. Therefore, stresses Anis, his article aims to warn of the danger of conversion to Christianity in Egypt, of the urgent need to awaken to and confront

it with every means at hand. According to Anis, Muslims can overcome this danger and foil the plot of the Christians. But, he claims, additional articles must be devoted to how to accomplish this.²⁷

One **Abu Saed Al-Amili**, a Salafi Jihadist sheikh and prominent commentator on Jihadist Web sites whose identity is a mystery, reacted severely to the behavior of the Coptic Church toward Konstantin and Shehata following their conversion to Islam, warning the Muslims of the dangerous, destructive influence of Christians in Islamic lands. Thus, for example, he claims the Christians in Egypt see themselves as being above the law – in fact, do not respect either Shari'a [Muslim religious law] or the laws of the tyrannical regime – which indicates the extent of their heresy. Al-Amili further claims that the term Ahl Al-Dhimma [protected people] is neither acceptable to them nor part of their terminology: "I am afraid it is the Muslims who have become the protected people in their own country, which is occupied by these Christians and their supporters among the rulers who have renounced Islam". According to Al-Amili, through the Shehata Affair the Church has sent a powerful, threatening message to its adherents, lest they even think of converting to Islam – something diametrically opposed to freedom of religion.²⁸

Sheikh Husayn bin Mahmud also emphasizes the sanction against Muslims conceiving of the Christians in Egypt as protected people, because they have kidnapped Muslim women: "The Muslims must take back their Muslim sister and kill those who kidnapped her, as a lesson to others". Moreover, if [the kidnapped

²⁷ Abu Abdullah Anis, "The Christians of Egypt: The Crusader Hammer Strikes the Body of the 'Umma [Muslim Nation]", *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:30-33) December 2010 (Arabic).

²⁸ Abu Saed Al-Amili, "Who Will Help Me? Who Will Come to My Aid? Until I Receive the Message from My God," *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:38) December 2010 (Arabic).

Muslim woman convert] is not freed and her honor is sullied, then all Muslims will be obligated to murder all Christians and burn their churches.²⁹

Sada Al-Jihad also quotes a religious edict [fatwa] issued by **Sheikh Abu Basir Al-Tartusi**, an exiled Syrian now residing in London, concerning the Coptic Church's capture of Kamilia Shehata. According to Sheikh Al-Tartusi, the Shehata Affair has raised the following issues:

1. The silence of the Mubarak government on the Shehata Affair is treasonous, and indicative of collaboration with the Church, as well as of pandering to public opinion in the West, including the US, in exchange for approval of the transfer of government to Mubarak's son and family.
2. Archbishop [Patriarch] Shenouda, who was responsible for the women's abduction, has succeeded in garnering US support, as indicated by the latter's willingness to intervene in Egypt's internal affairs on behalf of Shenouda, on a claim that it is protecting the Christian minority in the region.
3. Shehata's abduction and the pressure exerted on her to renounce her conversion to Islam and return to Christianity have not been condemned by the US, the West, or by human rights organizations. Al-Tartusi assumes that had Shehata's kidnappers been Muslims who had imprisoned her in a mosque and forced her to renounce her conversion to Christianity, a wave of criticism and censure would have ensued. He sees this as evidence that the crimes of the Coptic Church are legitimated, but when the victims are Muslim, no one raises a finger on their behalf.
4. The way Shenouda and his "band of evildoers" handled the Shehata Affair smacks of a desire to frighten other Christian women, lest they follow in [Shehata's] footsteps and their fate be identical to hers.

²⁹ Husayn bin Mahmud, "Murdering Men's Souls...Is Cheaper Than Besmirching the Honor of a Muslim Woman," *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:38), December 2010 (Arabic).

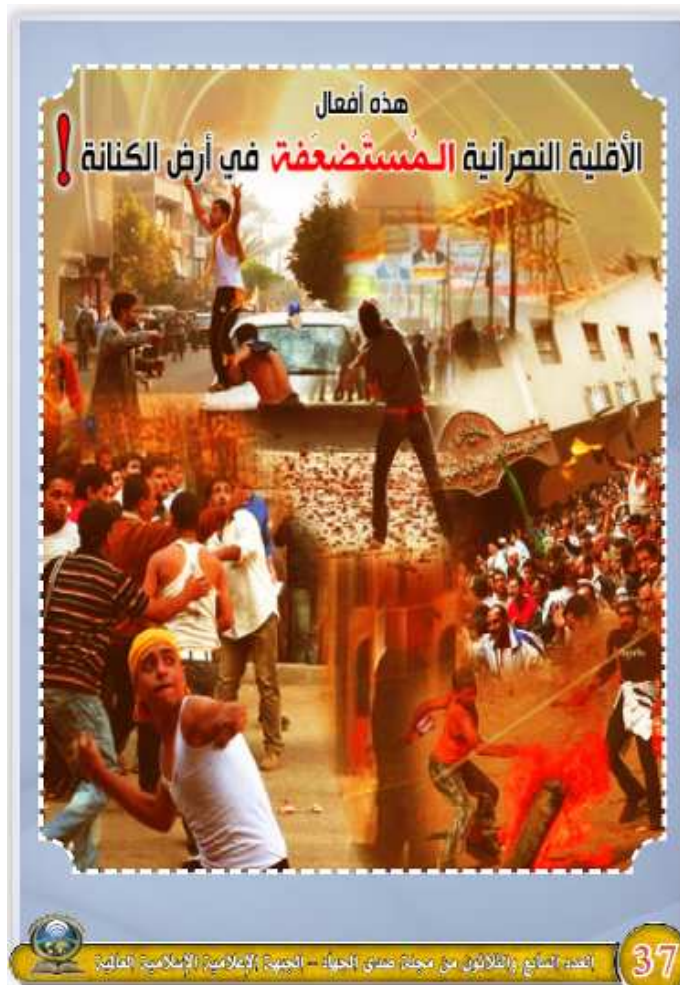
5. Shenouda and his cronies need to consider that actions against women converts to Islam, such as the murder of Konstantin subsequent to her captivity in a church, nullify the collective obligation of the Muslims in Egypt to live in peace and security with the Christian minority.

In light of the above, Al-Tartusi rules that every Egyptian Muslim is obligated to expend all effort and energy in freeing Kamilia Shehata, through any legitimate means, such as breaking down or tearing off church doors and searching each and every church, even trampling Shenouda, Al-Anba Bishawi (Shenouda's presumed successor, see above) and other priests if necessary. Put plainly, in this case, Al-Tartusi rules that it is permissible to murder Coptic religious leaders.³⁰



**"People of Egypt...What Has Been Taken by Force
Can Only Be Retrieved by Force"**

³⁰ Abu Basir Al-Tartusi, "Fatwa [Religious Ruling] on the Imprisonment of Our Sister Kamilia Shehata in the Coptic Churches of Egypt," *Sada Al-Jihad* (37:39-40), December 2010 (Arabic).



“These Are the Deeds of the ‘Weakened’ Christian Minority in Egypt”

Jihadist forums joined this melee in support of Al-Qaeda’s new strategy and a concerted effort to harm the Christian minority. One member of the Jihadist forum Shumukh Al-Islam, who participated in an online propaganda course offered by the forum, published a thread under the heading, “Kamilia Shehata and a Visual Encyclopedia of Preparing Explosives to Decimate the Cross”. The post calls on Muslims to come to their senses and endeavor to release Shehata by sowing fear among the infidel. This is the stated purpose behind the posting of the above-cited encyclopedia, a guide to preparing explosives that could be used against the Crusaders; the forum member further recommends establishing a

time table for learning this material and implementing it in the field.³¹ Another member of the same forum calling himself Abuhamza, who also participated in the above-cited course, posted a thread under the heading, "Wanted: The Black List". He then used this thread to post a list of Christian leaders in Iraq, with their photographs and biographical information – and a threat to their lives. Subsequently, out of fear for the personal safety of the Christian leaders whose names had been posted, www.syriaciraq.com, the Web site of the heads of the Christian community in Iraq, was taken down.³² Yet another member of the same forum wrote of the danger to Muslim identity in Iraq, given the massive Christian activity there – apparently under the guise of humanitarian assistance – which has supposedly increased since the demise of Saddam Hussein and the conquest of Iraq by the coalition forces. To support his version of events, the writer quoted an article penned by Dr. Majid Al-Khalifa (1970 - , an historian in the Iraqi Ministry of the Wakf during the reign of Saddam Hussein) titled, "Conversion to Christianity in Iraq...Vanished Facts", which lists "findings" on such missionary activity. According to the writer of this post, the churches in Iraq are an important base for Christian missionary groups, and prepare lists of Muslim families as targets for conversion to Christianity. The writer lists 13 missionary groups, such as the Global Mission Unit.³³

³¹ December 8, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=83413> (Arabic).

³² December 15, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=834679> (Arabic).

³³ December 24, 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=85801> (Arabic).



A photograph of the heads of the Christian sect in Iraq, posted on Jihadist Web forums as potential targets for aggression

The Terrorist Attack against the Church in Alexandria (December 31, 2010)

On **December 21, 2010**, the Ministry of War of the Islamic State of Iraq published a "Special Message to the Christian Churches and Organizations in Iraq", threatening harm to specific Christian leaders and institutions if the following demands were not met:

1. Publication of a declaration denouncing the bellicose policy of the Christian Church in Egypt toward converts to Islam.
2. Coercion of the Church in Egypt to provide information on, and release, the Muslim women prisoners "...as you acted to free Tariq Aziz from the hangman's rope" (a reference to Saddam Hussein's former foreign minister and deputy prime minister).
3. Prevention of collaboration between Christian churches, organizations and adherents and the occupation, and of the "Satanic alliance between Shi'ites and Crusaders in Baghdad".

4. Cessation of all direct and indirect missionary activity in the region.

In the same breath, the Islamic State of Iraq denied any intention of harming hostages (referred to in the missive as "detainees") or causing bloodshed during the October, 2010 takeover of the Al-Karada Church, but rather only a desire to send a message. It claimed that it was Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki's decision to storm the church compound that turned the site into a war zone and resulted in the killing of the hostages. According to the Islamic State of Iraq, the ancestors of Iraq's Christians had once lived peaceably with the Muslims and been treated kindly and fairly. Therefore, if the Christian Church in Iraq continued to ignore these demands and to collaborate with the enemies of Islam, it would bring protracted war upon itself.³⁴

These and other threats were also posted on Jihadist forums. During the latter half of December 2010, such forums – chiefly Shumukh Al-Islam – distinctly threatened a long list of Coptic churches in Egypt, The Netherlands, France, Austria, England and Germany, writing that they were potential sites for a terrorist attack on or around January 7, 2011, when Christmas was to be celebrated by the Coptic community. And indeed, the threat was carried out – but before the stated date.

On **December 31, 2010**, a car bomb exploded near the Coptic Al-Qiddisin Church in Alexandria, Egypt. (The church was indeed on the list of potential targets posted on Jihadist Web forums.) Twenty-four people were killed in the attack and 90 others were wounded. In response, security was increased around Coptic churches in several European countries, such as France, for the duration of the Christmas season.

³⁴ February 23, 2011, <http://www.majahden2.org/vb/showthread.php?t=13559> (Arabic).

Members of the Jihadist Web forums responded to this terrorist attack with glee and sympathy. On January 1, 2011, the Jihadist forum "Al-Mujahedeen Electronic Network" posted an announcement praising the terrorist attack in Alexandria and threatening that additional churches would be targeted. For example, the announcement stated that, "Nothing but the sword lies between the Copts living abroad and in [Egypt] and ourselves".³⁵ One member of the Shumukh Al-Islam forum noted that the terrorist attack had caused the "Westerners" to realize that when the honor of a Muslim woman in the West was in jeopardy, all the "peoples of the East" would come to her aid. Again it was threatened that Christians would drown in a sea of blood if the Muslim women prisoners were not released. According to the writer of this post, all the Muslims asked was that Shehata and Konstantin be freed – but the Christians were disrespecting them. Another member of the same forum wrote cheerfully, "Tonight the lions [that is, the attackers] have roared and brought us joy. [But] first and foremost they have no doubt brought joy to our sisters and delighted the leaders of Jihad". Other surfers concurred and praised the terrorist attack.³⁶



Remnants of the car bomb that exploded near the church in Alexandria

³⁵ January 1, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=328455> (Arabic).

³⁶ January 1, 2011, <http://shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=86863> (Arabic).

It would thus seem that the attack was perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. However, to date, no Jihadist media organ has published an official announcement regarding the identity of those responsible for the attack. Experts claim that the attack bears Al-Qaeda's stamp. Former Egyptian Minister of the Interior Habib Al-Adili claimed that the Egyptian government had incontrovertible proof of the involvement of the Palestinian "Army of Islam", a Salafi Jihadist group identified with Al-Qaeda and active in the Gaza Strip; however, the group itself denied this accusation. Another, unfamiliar Jihadist group called Markaz Al-Mujahedeen, also supposedly identified with Al-Qaeda, took responsibility for the attack, addressing Egypt's Christians thus: "We have not forgotten what you did in Egypt or that you have abducted Muslim women. Any staunch Muslim should praise the explosion at the church, especially because the church was full of people celebrating Christmas. Events of this type should be viewed with favor. They will occur whenever the churches are full, to remind [Christians] that they are a response to the actions of the head of the Church and his confreres".³⁷ However, given the mysterious provenance of this group, its comments should be treated with the utmost skepticism.

During the latter half of February 2011, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, then the number two man in Al-Qaeda, clearly stated that Al-Qaeda had had no hand in the bombing of the church in Alexandria.³⁸ Whether or not Al-Qaeda or its satellites were involved in the attack, it is clear that social-religious tension in Egypt increased by several degrees in its wake; it is doubtful whether Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt will return to what they once were in the foreseeable future.

The attack did draw condemnation from all corners of Egyptian society, including the religious establishment (Al-Azhar), Islamic groups such as the Muslim

³⁷ Misr Al-Jadidah, January 1, 2011, <http://www.misrelgdida.com/Incidents/48537.html> (Arabic).

³⁸ February 24, 2011, <http://www.atahadi.com/vb/showthread.php?p=80198> (Arabic).

Brotherhood and Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya, and even the local Salafi sect. Then-President Hosni Mubarak made a personal promise to apprehend the criminals involved in the attack. It is possible that the multitude of voices in Egypt decrying the attack prevented Al-Qaeda from officially addressing the matter. Nevertheless, Shari'a scholars associated with global Jihad and Al-Qaeda continued to justify the attack on Christian civilians in Islamic lands.

On **February 1, 2011**, **Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shanqiti** (see above) published a 57-page pamphlet clarifying the appropriate attitude toward the "protected peoples" in the current age. The article was meant as a response to Egyptian Salafis' stand against harming protected peoples. In an interview with the Al-Arabiya Network conducted on November 10, 2010, Muhammad Hasan (a prominent Salafi sheikh in Egypt) harshly condemned the slaughter, stressing that it was absolutely forbidden for Muslims to kill "protected peoples" such as the Christians of Egypt. He expressed willingness to confront any Muslim who believed differently, to make him aware of his error, and reiterated his demand that [the Christians] be protected and not harmed.³⁹

In his pamphlet, Al-Shanqiti claims that Hasan's approach is fundamentally flawed. Moreover, he claims that Hasan and people like him unconditionally support their infidel governments, which are in league with the enemies of Allah and do not respect Shari'a, preferring instead to condemn the war of the mujahedeen against heretical regimes and their soldiers and to depict the mujahedeen in an ugly light. To illustrate, Al-Shanqiti notes that Muhammad Hasan defended the Egyptian government's decision to enforce an embargo on the Gaza Strip during the war there in 2008. Further, Al-Shanqiti writes, "We must always pay attention to the opinion of Muhammad Hasan, who would like to

³⁹ *Al-Arabiya*, November 10, 2010,
<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/11/10/125627.html> (Arabic).

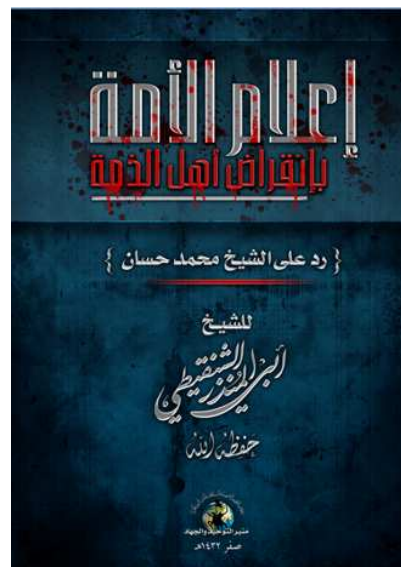
maintain cordial relations with governments that are fighting the laws of Allah...". Al-Shanqiti criticizes the failure of many Muslim religious leaders to respond to the abduction of the Muslim women converts, adding "Yet when the mujahedeen attacked the Christians to avenge their imprisoned sisters, these sheikhs rose from their silent graves to revile those who dared to harm the Christians!!". Al-Shanqiti wonders whether the honor of a protected person is more elevated than that of a Muslim.

It is worth noting that, in effect, Al-Shanqiti agrees with Hasan's interpretation that harming protected peoples [Ahl Al-Dhimma] is against the laws of Islam. However, he claims that the crux of the debate is whether the Christians *currently* living in Islamic lands can be considered protected peoples. His stand is unequivocal: **"The Christians [living] today in Islamic lands are not [to be considered] protected peoples, since the conditions [for their being considered thus] do not apply to them"**. According to Al-Shanqiti, Christians currently living in Islamic lands do not respect or even recognize the protection agreement, and even refuse to be under the protection of Muslims, with all that entails. Al-Shanqiti clarifies the two inter-related criteria necessary for Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule to be eligible for the status of protected peoples:

1. Payment of a per capita tax, known as Jizyya.
2. Sighar, a term with three interpretations: (a) compliance with the dictates of Islam; (b) Jizyya should be collected from Jews and Christians in a way that humiliates them; and (c) the payment of the Jizyya.

Al Shanqiti claims that all three interpretations are correct, such that if any one of the conditions does not exist, non-Muslims are ineligible for the protection of the Muslims, and the security of their lives and property can be neither ensured

nor respected. Since the Christians now living in Egypt and other Muslim countries do not pay Jizyya, Al-Shanqiti claims they can no longer be protected peoples. He also states that the Christians in Egypt led by Shenouda have in effect established a State within a State and behave as they please – as indicated by the incarceration of Shehata – with the support of “their co-religionists [that is, the] Christians who today rule the world”. Given this dismal picture, Al-Shanqiti laments, it is no wonder that the Christians in Egypt do not see themselves as under the protection of the Muslims. Moreover, “if these Christians are not ready to accept their [status as] protected people of the Muslims, how can Sheikh Muhammad Hasan claim that they [should be considered] so...?” And so, Al-Shanqiti stresses, Christians in Muslim lands, especially Egypt, are not eligible for protection and their lives and property may be taken.⁴⁰



The cover of Al-Shanqiti's pamphlet on the status of the "protected peoples" [Ahl Al-Dhimma]

⁴⁰ February 1, 2011, <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=34138>, www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=31011108 (Arabic). It is worth noting that, in an earlier fatwa [religious ruling] Al-Shanqiti stated that it was best to first attack Christian leaders, whether or not they were priests, who were harming Islam directly or indirectly, for example through incitement and so forth. See also Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shanqiti, "Freeing the Women Prisoners from the Christian Churches," *Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=25091033> (Arabic).

At the end of February 2011, the Jihadist media organ *As-Sahab* published an audio recording of **Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri** titled, "A Message of Hope and a Herald to Our Residents of Egypt".⁴¹ The second part of this recording was devoted in part to the crisis in Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt. He blamed the Copts for exacerbating the tension that had arisen in any case following the Shehata Affair. At the same time, he again renounced any involvement in the attack against the Coptic church in Alexandria, adding that Mubarak's regime was partly responsible for the crisis in Christian-Muslim relations because of its failure to take a clear stance on the Shehata Affair; this in turn was due to Mubarak's having capitulated to the dictates of the Christian Church, which exploited the delicacy of his political situation arising from his desire to pass the mantle of government on to his son. According to Al-Zawahiri, the leadership of Al-Azhar was also responsible for exacerbation of Christian-Muslim tensions, because of their obeisance to the State's security forces. Egypt's judicial system was also guilty of the crisis in Al-Zawahiri's eyes, because of its silence on the matter. Further, Al-Zawahiri blamed the US for pushing the Coptic Church of Egypt towards segregation and divisiveness. Later in his comments, Al-Zawahiri directly asked the Coptic Church to cease collaborating with the enemies of Islam and avoid deliberately provoking the Muslims; he blamed the Church for attempting to establish a State within a State. At the same time, he stated that Egypt's Copts had nothing to fear from Al-Qaeda, whose attention was focused on the fight against the Crusader West and its collaborators.⁴² Al-Zawahiri then spoke to

⁴¹ February 24, 2011, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=96594>.

⁴² As early as November 2008, in an interview that he granted to the Jihadist media outlet *As-Sahab*, Al-Zawahiri denounced the Coptic Church in Egypt for its ostensible part in the disappearance of Wafa Konstantin. Al-Zawahiri protested the absurd situation in which Egypt found itself, in which Christians had more power and influence than Muslims, enabling the former to do as they please – as in the case of the abduction and torture of women converts to Islam. In his eyes, the strengthened status of the Christians in Egypt is due to the backing they receive from the US.

the Muslims about the Christians in their countries, and especially in Egypt, which may be summarized thus: there are two types of Christian: one aspires to maintain proper relations with Muslims, and does not accept the Crusader Jewish occupation of Arab and Muslim lands; the other accepts the presence of Americans in Islamic lands and the conquest of Palestine by Israel. Al-Zawahiri counseled his listeners to behave toward each type accordingly. Lastly, Al-Zawahiri stressed that Al-Qaeda did not want a war against the Christians, but rather was investing most of its efforts in war against the West and the Zionists. It is very possible that the timing of the publication of Al-Zawahiri's audio recording, and his denial of Al-Qaeda's involvement in the Alexandria attack, were related to the "Arab Spring" in Egypt. In other words, it seems that Al-Zawahiri does not want Egypt's revolutionaries to identify Al-Qaeda as disruptive or as an obstacle to the revolutionary process, which they might do if they were to see the group as fanning the flames of religious tension between Copts and Muslims, or as devolving the country into civil war. Put differently, it is notable that Al-Zawahiri tries to position Al-Qaeda as a partner in the revolution in Egypt rather than as an impediment to it. It is thus reasonable to assume that, for the time being, Al-Qaeda has chosen to "freeze" its strategic plan of tormenting the Christian minority – at least in Egypt, and at least until the direction of the revolutions in the Arab world becomes clearer.

Epilog

Far from subsiding, religious tensions in Egypt have continued to grow stronger since the February 11, 2011 resignation of Hosni Mubarak – without Al-Qaeda's intervention. Attempts by Muslim and Christian religious leaders to calm the tense atmosphere and mollify public opinion have not been successful. Under pressure from Muslim and Christian religious leaders, Kamilia Shehata was interviewed on Egyptian Coptic television on May 7, 2011; she denied, once and for all, that she had ever converted to Islam or been kidnapped by the Coptic Church. She emphasized that there was no truth to the rumors about her, and stated that she had always been a Christian. Moreover, she claimed that the bloody events between Christians and Muslims had brought her closer to Christianity.⁴³ This interview did nothing to reduce religious tensions in Egypt: several hours after it, violent conflict erupted between Muslims, Salafis among them, and Christians in the large Ambaba Quarter of Cairo, culminating in an attempt to set fire to the Marimina Church; 12 people were killed. As in previous cases, this conflagration was started by a rumor that an Egyptian Coptic woman named Abir Til'at Fakhri had been abducted by the Coptic Church, again supposedly because she had converted to Islam.⁴⁴

Members of Jihadist forums continue to discuss these issues and threaten to attack churches and Christians. For example, on June 2, 2011, Asad Al-Islam, Web master of the visual and audio posts on the Jihadist forum Al-Mujahedeen

⁴³ *Al-Yawm Al-Sabi'*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=407073> (Arabic).

⁴⁴ In an interview, Al-Fakhri admitted having converted to Islam at Al-Azhar, and having being imprisoned by the Coptic Church several times thereafter. For the extensive interview with Al-Fakhri see *Al-Yawm Al-Sabi'*, May 9, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=408616> (Arabic).

Electronic Network, posted an express threat to harm Egyptian Christians, to avenge the bloody clashes between Muslims and Christians on May 7, 2011.⁴⁵



Abir Til'at Al-Fakhri

Summary

The religious tensions that began in Egypt following the conversion to Islam of Kamilia Shehata in July 2010 have no doubt given Al-Qaeda a golden opportunity to position itself as Islam's gatekeeper and the Muslims' protector. A wave of official publications by Jihadist media outlets on the so-called Shehata Affair, re-examination of the status under Shari'a [religious law] of Christian minorities in Islamic lands, and the terrorist attack against Christians in Iraq, all indicate a new trend in Al-Qaeda, if not a strategy of attacking Christian minorities. As Salafi Jihadist thinkers continue trying to prove, Christian minorities in Islamic lands are no longer eligible to be considered under the protection of the Muslims (Ahl Al-Dhimma); rather, they are seen as being under the West's protection, and as a fifth column expressly sent by the Christian West to weaken Islam from within. The brutal, oppressive behavior of the Coptic Church toward women converts to Islam in Egypt is seen as evidence of this, and as a pretext for

⁴⁵ June 2, 2011, <http://www.majahden.com/vb/showthread.php?t=17185> (Arabic).

rescinding the Christians' status as "protected people" and removing the obligation for Muslims to offer them personal and material protection. Put plainly, the lives, property, and institutions of Christian minorities are no longer safe from harm, and in fact have become a legitimate target of attack.

Although it is difficult to assess the precise reasons for this change, a number of factors, noted above, may be listed:

1. Opportunism – that is, a yen to increase popular support for Al-Qaeda.
2. A deepening religious rift, reduced personal and national security, and the creation of a climate suitable for the infiltration and establishment of Jihadist organizations in Egypt.
3. An attempt to sully the prestige of the Egyptian government, presenting it as a corrupt regime that has failed to protect its citizens and has set policy based on the whims of the Mubarak family, in its desire to keep power.
4. Branding Al-Qaeda as the true representative of the Muslim Umma [nation], attentive to its desires and protecting it in times of crisis – a feeling that swelled in the vacuum of Muslim authority (from either the regime or the religious establishment) – and as willing to protect the Muslim community from the separatist trends of non-Muslim citizens reflected in the Shehata Affair.
5. Psychological warfare and terrorism against Christian communities in Islamic countries aimed to prevent incitement and provocation against Islam and collaboration with the West.
6. Making it known that Al-Qaeda can reach any place it chooses, if Islam has been attacked.

7. Christian populations of Islamic countries are a relatively easy, convenient target, especially since their ability to retaliate against such threats is minimal at best.

Apparently, the "Arab Spring", and its surprising success in deposing the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, has led Al-Qaeda's decision-makers to weigh continuing a policy of harm to Christian minorities. This does not mean that threats or the intention to do harm them have ceased completely; as noted, the Jihadist Web forums post threats of one sort or another from time to time. However, as of this writing, it appears that Al-Qaeda wishes to maintain a certain restraint, at least until the situation becomes clearer, and to position itself as a partner in the revolution in Islamic countries, especially Egypt, rather than as a subversive force seeking to drive a wedge into the spokes of the revolution. However, if it becomes clear that the revolution in the Arab world is not moving in the "right" direction, from Al-Qaeda's perspective, it will be very easy for the organization to resume fomenting religious strife and generating social chaos, leading to the loss of stability and security in the region – never a desirable outcome.