Custodians of social peace or contenders in a popularity contest?
The Egyptian Armed Forces and Egypt's Coptic Christians

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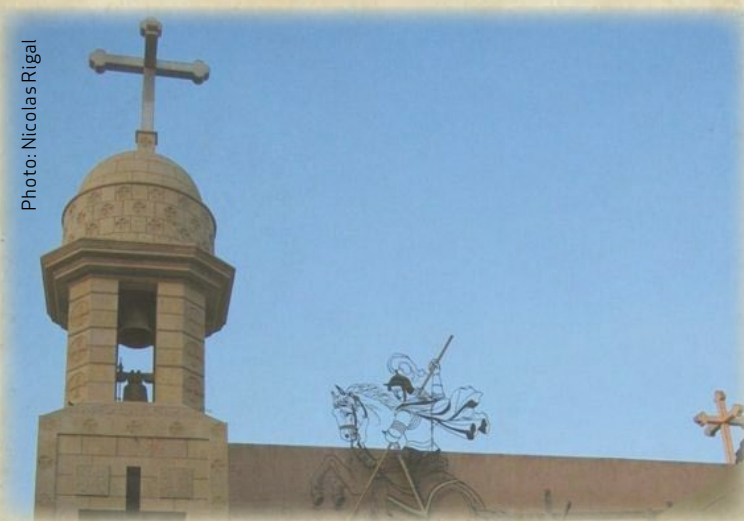
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Contents

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the current and past relations between the Egyptian Coptic Christian community and the Egyptian Armed Forces.[1] The relationship between these actors has increased in relevance in recent time, due to the frequency of sectarian violence, and the Egyptian military's involvement in such incidents. With the involvement of the Egyptian Armed Forces in politics and governance, the trade-off between the military's popularity and its actions has become increasingly visible. I therefore argue that the military's will to act internally must be seen as conditioned by the political costs of such actions.

Theoretically, both religious identities and conscript armies are crucial bricks in state- and nation-building. Therefore, this report will also show how Egyptian regimes, intertwined with the top echelons of the armed forces, have dealt with obstacles to national unity and consolidation of state power.

Current examples of interactions between units and representatives of the armed forces and Copts will be presented against a historical background, where the development of the military institution vis-à-vis the Coptic community is discussed. Based on a thorough review of secondary sources, as well as data from personal interviews, the report finds that there are clear inconsistencies in the Egyptian military's relationship with the Coptic community. Beneath the military's rhetoric of national unity and symbolic gestures of military-led church reconstructions and reconciliation councils is a personnel base that currently, and historically, has few Copts in its ranks. The military has led several oppressive and discriminative operations directed specifically at Coptic places of worship and Coptic activists.

The implication of these findings is that if national unity can be defined as social peace and tolerance, the Egyptian military has yet to prove that it can play a constructive role in maintaining it. In order to foster a society that is more tolerant than what we see in Egypt today, the political process must be more inclusive than it is in its current state.

1. Introduction

On Sunday 9 October 2011, Egyptian security forces deployed tear gas and live ammunition in attempting to disperse a large crowd of protesters in downtown Cairo. Army vehicles then smashed into the crowd, crushing several people to death, and severely injuring others. By nightfall, 17 demonstrators were dead, and 300 more injured (Tadros 2013a, 187-188; Iskander 2012, 166-167). This event was later dubbed the "Maspero Massacre" because it took place at the site of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union, popularly dubbed "Maspero." The presence of media did not constrain the Egyptian security forces, but it made sure that parts of the encroachment were caught on tape, and later seen on the news across the world. The crowd at Maspero that day mostly consisted of Christian Egyptians, generally referred to as Copts.[2] They were there to protest the burning of a church in al-Marinab, a village in southern Egypt.

The event was a new turn in the relationship between Egyptians and the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF). Throughout the revolutionary events of 2011, a much-repeated slogan of both protestors and military personnel had been, "The army and the people are one hand" (Strasser 2012). On 9 October the people and military directly confronted each other in a way that, until then, had been reserved for the clashes between protesters and internal security forces. The incident also reminded Egyptian Copts that they now had an unstable relationship with multiple branches of the state security apparatus. This would potentially lead to fewer sources of protection in the event of future sectarian violence against Copts and churches.

This report will deal with the relationship between the most powerful security institution in Egypt and the Coptic community. What can be observed about the interaction between the Egyptian Copts and the Egyptian Armed Forces, and what are the implications of these observations for the potential of sectarian conflict in Egypt?

1.1 Structure of paper and data

The paper will address the relationship between Egypt's Christian minority and the EAF, historically and today. Consequently, it is divided into two main parts. I conduct a historical analysis in the first part, and reflect on more recent developments in the second one.

In the first part, I begin by providing a brief background chapter on Egypt's Copts, before I introduce the historical development of Coptic-military relations in section 3, conducting a thorough literature review. Section 4 draws on observations of conflict and cooperation between local Coptic communities and military units in recent time, and discusses the implications of the various modes of behaviour observed. These interactions occur in different spheres of society, from local encounters between military ground units and Coptic laypeople, to the encounters between the higher clergy and military generals in the upper echelons of politics. Section 5 and 6 render special attention to the fall of Mohammed Morsi and the recent political development, focusing on the security situation and military-Coptic relations in this period. Section 7 presents a broader discussion, situating the sectarian

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[2] Christians in Egypt are generally referred to as Copts. The Coptic Orthodox Church by far represents the biggest Christian denomination in Egypt, and therefore acts as a national Church. There are both Protestants and Catholics in Egypt, but they have small communities, and are often referred to as Copts as well (Elsässer 2011). In this report I will use the designation of "Copts" in most cases, unless referring to them more generally in the context of the Christian faith.

conflict in the context of the fractionalised Egyptian state. I briefly conclude and summarize my findings in section 8.

The report draws on several sources of data. It benefits in part from interviews and personal observations from a yearlong residency in Cairo, from August 2010 to July 2011, and several shorter field trips in 2012 and 2013. For the most part it builds on secondary sources from history and social science, as well as on news articles and reports from organizations.

In recent literature about Egyptian politics and society in the post-January 2011 context, the Egyptian military and the Copts have been analyzed separately and with various theoretical perspectives. The EAF has garnered much academic attention for its political role in the Egyptian uprsing against President Mubarak in 2011 (e.g., Karawan 2011; Kandil 2012; Lutterbeck 2012; Kurtzer and Svenstrup 2012; Nepstad 2013). The Egyptian Coptic community remains somewhat understudied, although there has been a rise in English language academic works in the past few years (Ibrahim 2011; Elsässer 2011; Iskander 2012; Tadros 2013a; Christiansen 2013).[3] Importantly, new works on the Coptic community focus on Egyptian Copts as political and social actors, rather than reducing them to victims, or unfortunate *dhimmis* (non-Muslims) in a Muslim state. Such a perspective had been absent until recently, and is crucial to understand the development of contemporary Egyptian society and politics (see Sedra 2009). In this report I will use findings from both the military-focused and the sectarian-focused strands of literature, complimented by other sources, to draw a more complete picture of the relationship between Egypt's Copts and the military.

1.2   A note on theoretical perspectives

Social science theory will not be strongly emphasized in this report. It is, however, worth noting that the relationship between social and religious cleavages (i.e., issues and identities that divide a population) and the military is at the heart of the theory of state- and nation-building. Nation-building can be loosely defined as "a process that seeks to unite different, unrelated and sometimes incongruent population groups into an integrated and identifiable nation" (du Pisani and Lamb 2004, 11). Nation-building also has an important territorial dimension to it, namely the relationship between centres and peripheries. Centres are the privileged locations within a territory, containing arenas for military–administrative decision-making, meeting places for resource holders, and monuments and gathering places for ceremonial affirmation of identities (Flora et al. 1999, 110-111). Ancient Egypt figures in the theory of state and nation-building as an archetype of the *monocephalic empire*, a territory with a concentrated location of resource holders in only one centre.[4] This is contrasted with the polycephalic structure of Mesopotamia, where self-assertive cities formed the basis for social activity, which required a different system of control and adjudication, established across a network of developed centres. Subordinate to the authority of the centre is the spatial archetype of the periphery. The periphery is characterized by its distance, dependence on, and difference from the centre. Peripheries have some sense of separate identity, but the lack of defence in peripheral areas against the rest of the territory makes them penetrable by economic, cultural, and political transactions from the centre (Flora et al. 1999, 98-99, 115-116).

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[3] A considerable share of the most recent literature on Coptic relations is written in Arabic only. See page 3 in Tadros (2013) for an overview and references.

[4] In pharaonic Egypt the agricultural setting of the dynasty caused a decentralized (non-urban) social activity. Although there existed plenty of market towns, the concept of the city played an insignificant role until Thebes assumed a metropolitan character in 1500 BC. As such, the land was easily controlled from *one* powerful center (Flora et al. 1999, 99).

The military's monopoly of arms, organizational superiority, and symbolic status make it a potent force in such processes. Conscription, for example, is considered to be one of the crucial tools in "standardizing," or assimilating, people into the nation's core group (Flora et al. 1999, 65, 242; Mylonas 2013, 190). Militaries emerged with the establishment of organized human communities, predating the creation of the modern state, and are therefore very powerful institutions. The armed forces may contribute to social cohesion and social solidarity among their conscripts and personnel, bringing together people of various ethnic, regional, and religious backgrounds. In fragile states, the armed forces may also be the only sufficiently organized element to compete for political power and formulate public policies. The ability to fulfil these and other functions related to nation-building, however, depends on a range of factors that characterize the military, such as the representativeness of the officer corps, the historical role of the military and the popular support of the local population (du Pisani and Lamb 2004, 6, 12-15). I will touch upon these three elements in my analysis below, although I won't use them explicitly as analytical categories. Thinking about these issues in relation to the Coptic minority brings forth several key questions: Are Copts and Muslims represented in equal terms in the officer corps? Has the military historically included both denominations, and contributed to a common national identity that trumps religious identities? Is the military held in high regard by the population, and what does it do to maintain its popularity? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the sections below.

Religion can be considered a basis for membership in a community that cuts across kinship ties. In Stein Rokkan's theory, religious organizations unite people through rites and traditions, and the relationship between Church and state is crucial to explain the development of European nation-states. This builds on the assertions of Max Weber, who saw religion as one of the core forces in society, and the development of Christianity as essential to the establishment of new social boundaries in Europe under the Roman and Byzantine empires. Because of its ability to define membership groups, religion is a potent force for changing such boundaries and consequentially important for nation-building. The religious script was important for spreading and preserving a common language, the other cultural component of Rokkan's theories. Religion takes an especially important role in identity-building if other cultural characteristics, such as language, are similar between two groups (Flora et al. 1999, 105-106, 128-130, 171).

This report will focus on Coptic-military relations specifically, but its findings will have implications for the process of Egyptian nation-building more generally. On the one hand, the military has historically been the spearhead in Egyptian nation-building, as many national institutions were built around it, and the EAF frequently use national unity rhetoric in public media. On the other hand, one finds few Copts among its top ranks today, suggesting that it does not sufficiently represent the religious diversity of Egyptian society (interview with Mariz and Akram Tadros, 14 August 2013). There is also uncertainty attached to the military's response to sectarian tension, especially after the Maspero Massacre. In some instances the Egyptian Armed Forces have confronted the Coptic community with aggression, while in other instances they have protected them. Outright discrimination is a more complicated issue. There are reports of discrimination, but not sufficient to support a claim that discrimination is a general tendency in the armed forces. There is some evidence of systematic discrimination of Copts in the public sector (Pennington 1982, 169; Elsässer 2011, 97), in which retired officers hold senior positions, dominating some branches.

Below I will briefly introduce the Egyptian Coptic minority to establish a context for the ensuing historical analysis. I will focus here on the development of a Coptic identity, and the basis for labelling the Coptic inhabitants of Egypt a *community*.

"Mar Girgis", or St. George, Egypt's national saint slays the dragon on a church façade in Coptic Cairo.
Photo: Lars Gunnar Christiansen

2. Egypt's Copts - *dhimma*, citizens, activists

It is frequently stated that the word *Copt* derives from *Aigyptos*, the Greek word for Egypt. Arabs used *Qibti* when they talked of Egyptians, which was adopted by the English language as *Copt* (e.g., Mikhail 1911, 2). This is illustrative of the ancient roots of Christianity in Egypt, but also of the complex identity issues that are beneath the Muslim-Arab image of today's Egypt. Copts believe that Saint Mark brought Christianity to Egypt in the early first century (see Ameen 1968), and that the majority of Egypt's inhabitants were Christian at the time of the Arab invasion in 632 CE. Since then, Egyptian society has gradually become more dominated by Islam and Arab culture. "Coptic" is also the designation of the language spoken in Egypt at the time of the invasion, which gradually declined in everyday usage until modern times. Arabic became the official language in 800 CE, and by the turn of the first millennium most inhabitants of Lower Egypt (Cairo and the Nile delta) spoke only Arabic. Today, the Coptic language is used in liturgy, but is not widely understood among Copts. Christian

conversion to Islam increased in the ninth century, and by the 1300s the Copts constituted a minority of about 10 per cent (Scott 2010, 29-30; Iskander 2012, 11-12). The exact number of Copts in Egypt today is unknown. A 1996 census estimated that they were around 4.5 million, thus constituting about 6 per cent of the Egyptian total population (Delhaye 2012, 71; Elsässer 2011, 236).[5]

With reference to the theoretical literature about nation-building, religion carries identity markers through the institutions and customs that it produces (e.g., Flora et al. 1999, 128-129). The Coptic Orthodox Church was initially founded on the Greek Orthodox Church, and until the second century there were only Greek bishops in Egypt. However, there was a strong local opposition towards the Greek, who were considered representatives of the Byzantine Empire. Consequently, a distinct Coptic culture and nationalism developed, where local priests held both religious and civil authority. This resulted in the separation of the Coptic Church at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 (Iskander 2012, 11-16). The Coptic identity thereby has strong historical roots, and experienced its own struggle between centre and periphery in its formative years. The eventual translation of Greek Christian texts to colloquial Coptic (Egyptian) in the second and third centuries, and the famous effort of the sainted Egyptian monk Shenouda the Archimandrite (ca. 345 – 465 AD) to elevate the Coptic language, illustrate the early unification of this identity (Takla 1996). Coptic nationalism was challenged by the conversions to Islam and Arabization that followed the seventh century. The isolation from the rest of the Christian world may, however, also have contributed to a stronger religious identity among those who remained Christians (Iskander 2012). Up until today the Coptic Church regards itself as the crib and harbinger of Egyptian Christian culture, and seeks to preserve Coptic identity through a large repertoire of religious and social activities. Egypt experienced a religious revival in the twentieth century, which increased the status of the Church and ecclesiastical professions. The Church has increasingly been involved in a range of non-religious matters and activities:

> For increasing parts of the Coptic population, the Church is not just a source of spiritual and moral guidance, but also a provider of services and a social safety net, an educator and employer, and a "patron" and protector. To the extent that the Church performs all these functions, or keeps them within its orbit, it creates legitimacy for its own leading role in the Coptic community; this explains the fact that, in spite of the despotic potential of clerical authority that has not escaped many observers, most Copts have tended to accept and obey this authority, in spiritual as well as temporal matters. (Elsässer 2011, 135)

This patron-client relationship, between the upper clergy and laity, provided the Church with an opportunity to speak with a single voice in political matters as well. This role became increasingly more evident during Hosni Mubarak's presidency, when an unofficial alliance was formed between the government and the Church, foremost represented by Pope Shenouda. Pope Shenouda had been under house arrest under President Sadat because of provocations against the regime present in his speeches and activism. He was released by Mubarak in 1985, and began pursuing the role of mediator with the government on behalf of the entire religious community. This has been characterized as the modern version of the Ottoman-era "millet-system" where religious minorities were granted partial autonomy and self-rule, a strategy also adopted by Shenouda's predecessor, Pope Kirollos. It provided the pope with authority over church construction permits, and other resources that could be distributed to the dioceses (see Sedra 1999).

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[5] Although this is the latest figure from an official census, estimates vary among scholars. Iskander (2012, 12) refers to 6 per cent as a government estimate, while many churches claim that Copts constitute at least 15 per cent of the population. Elsässer (2011, 236) cites expatriate Coptic activists in claiming a share as high as between 15 and 20 per cent, but considers the official estimate of 6 per cent to be closely accurate (according to "different independent scholars"). Ten per cent is also a commonly used estimate (Scott 2010, 8).

On the one hand, this provided the Copts with a limited guarantee of protection from the government in cases of sectarian disputes (see Soliman 2009). On the other hand, the Church was compelled to embrace government policies, and sing along with the official rhetoric of national unity. For example, up until 2010, the Church routinely dismissed as false the accusations of religious discrimination coming from the annual religious freedom reports by the US foreign ministry (Iskander 2012, 158).

A consequence of the political role of the Church was the marginalization of Coptic civil society. While the Church-regime pact brought certain concessions from the government, it also meant that the Church was responsible for the containment of the Coptic citizenry. Considering the general repression of opposition from the regime and the Islamist insurgency in the 1990s, the conditions of the previously vibrant Coptic civil society worsened under Mubarak's presidency. In the beginning of the 2000s, however, Coptic activism again gained traction. In the years before and after the 2011 uprising it produced numerous new movements, civil society organizations and politicians. Pope Tawadros, enthroned in 2012, has been important for this new political activism, as he has opposed an extensive role of the Church in politics (Christiansen 2013). The new political organizations have mostly gravitated towards a secular,[6] liberal, and leftist political spectrum, and most importantly towards a strong opposition to Islamist politics in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood specifically (see Tadros 2012, 2013a; Iskander 2012; Sedra 2012; Christiansen 2013). Their participation in the protests against Mohamed Morsi, which peaked on 30 June 2013, was therefore understandable.

Following the 30 June protests, Egypt was struck by a wave of sectarian violence, which sprung out of a media campaign launched by Brotherhood supporters. The campaign claimed that the demonstrations were a Christian conspiracy against Islam. TV-channel *Misr 25* announced that Christians were attacking mosques, while on another channel a conservative sheikh announced that Christians were chanting, "Jesus is the solution," at Tahrir Square (Tadros 2013b).[7] As a result, Coptic churches and properties across Egypt were violently attacked by pro-Morsi mobs. This illustrates the fragility of Egypt's social peace. As one Coptic activist admitted in a recent phone interview: "The Copts are now paying a tax for Egypt, which we must accept" (interview with Mina Magdy, 5 September 2013).

This is not the first time Copts have been victims of attacks in Egypt, and indeed, in times of crisis it may seem like Copts are paying a steep price to keep the seams of Egyptian society together. Copts, however, play diverse roles in the Egyptian society, and should not be viewed simply as victims, or as a homogenous group. In his book *Life as Politics*, Asef Bayat devotes an entire chapter to describing the seemingly harmonious inter-faith community in Shubra, a middle class district in Cairo (2010, 185-208). On the other hand, the community's relationship with the rest of society cannot be analysed without acknowledging that they are a Christian minority in a Muslim state, where Copts had the status of *dhimma* until 1855 (Iskander 2012, 178).[8] *Dhimma* refers to a contract of protection, through which the Muslim community granted hospitality and protection to Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians (often referred to as People of the Book), and other non-Muslims. This was on the condition that they

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[6] The term *secular* is highly disputed in Egypt. Secularity is generally associated with un-godliness, which does not fare well with Egypt's conservative masses. The term *civil* is often used by Egyptians as a replacement, but equally connotes the separation of religion and state (Carnegie Endowment 2011; Hill 2013).

[7] The slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood is "Islam is the solution." Accusing Christians of chanting, "Jesus is the solution," would therefore connote mockery of the Muslim Brotherhood, and to some, represent an insult to Islam.

[8] According to Iskander "the Copts' status as *dhimmi* effectively came to an end in 1855 during the reign of Sai'd Pasha" who abolished *jizya*, and with his successor Ismail who declared Copts as equal members in the nation and allowed them to run for political office (2012, 178).

acknowledge the domination of Islam and pay the *jizya*, a tax levied on each non-Muslim individual. The concept of *jizya* is perhaps particularly relevant to this report, as some modernist scholars argue that it served as a substitute for military service, from which the *dhimma* were exempted after the time of Umar Ibn al-Khattāb (Scott 2010, 16-17, 21). Copts in 1830s Egypt were envied for their immunity from military service, although the reason for this exemption was, as stated by Lane, that "no Muslim prince would honour a Christian by employing him to fight against a Muslim enemy" (Scott 2010, 21). While harsh interpretations consider the *jizya* as a punishment for infidelity and an instrument of humiliation, it is perhaps best seen as a substitute for converting to Islam, receiving protection from the state, and retaining the right to stay in Islamic lands (Scott 2010, 21-22).

3. The Egyptian Armed Forces and the Copts – a historical overview

In this section of the report, I will go into the historical relationship between the Coptic community and the Egyptian Armed Forces. The earliest observations discussed here date back to the seventeenth century. To consider these early stages is essential for the topic at hand, because it shows how Copts, to a higher extent than Muslims, have been affiliated with the colonial military forces and administrations. It also illustrates how the historical involvement of Copts in the military differs from the nationalist military movement that organised the 1952 coup d'état against the monarchy, where the leading officers were Muslims.

3.1 Copts and the EAF under Muhammad 'Ali and the British protectorate

Mohammad 'Ali, who ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848,[9] has often been praised for building the modern Egyptian state. He revitalized agriculture, reformed the educational system, transformed the legal establishment, and introduced modern industry. The foundation of the modern Egyptian army was, however, the precondition for these processes. Factories, schools, and hospitals were built to serve the military. "Indeed, such was the close inter-connection between the military and other sectors of the state and the economy, that Egypt … had become a military state" (Fahmy 1998, 421). The Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy has been widely praised for his research on Mohammad 'Ali's conscripted army. With reference to nation-building, Fahmy has clearly documented that the formation of a national Egyptian identity through conscription and war was not done in a jiffy. In the view of nationalist Egyptian historians, 'Ali's army was seen as a "'school' in which they [the peasants/*fellahin*] were 'taught' how to identify themselves as 'Egyptians'" (Fahmy 1998, 422). In this view, nationalism had always laid dormant in the Egyptian peasantry's attachment to land and soil, now to be awaken by modern conscription. Fahmy instead argues that the ethnic composition of the army (Turkish-speaking Ottoman and Mamluk officers, and Arabic-speaking Egyptian conscripts), and the brutal and arbitrary methods of conscription (which caused rebellions and mass desertions) caused the peasant conscripts to detest both the military and the regime. However, the relationship between the Egyptian state and its citizens changed with the institutionalization of a conscripted army, and familiarized Egyptians with the authority of the nation-state (Fahmy 1997, 1998).

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[9] Muhammad Ali was a Turkish commander in the Ottoman Army who drove out Napoleon's forces and seized power in 1805.

The role of the Copts among the ruling military elites may be traced back to the late seventeenth century, when the members of the Coptic elite worked as accountants, secretaries, clerks, managers (*mūbashirūn*) and tax collectors (*arākhina*) on behalf of the French, and later under Muhammad 'Ali (Elsässer 2011). This class of senior bureaucrats was so much associated with the Coptic community that in the late eighteenth century the position of chief tax collector was also considered the head of the Coptic community. Under the French, some Copts participated in an independent Coptic legion with the French army. The legion was initially based on an assortment of tax collectors who participated in the campaign in Upper Egypt to capture the *mamlūk* Murad Bey. It grew to a competent force of more than a thousand men, and assisted in fighting the ensuing Ottoman attack. When the fighting ceased, and the French eventually withdrew, many of the Coptic legionnaires accepted the offer of being evacuated to France (Silvera 1980, 4). As such, the French cooperated with Copts on the basis of their Christian identity. This assertion of course comes with many reservations. After all, one cannot know the extension of the support for this legion among all the Copts who did not join it, nor do we know the motivations for the Copts who joined. Murad Bey was of Georgian origin, and known as a ferocious ruler, and was perhaps regarded as a lesser evil than the French occupation.

Nevertheless, Muhammed 'Ali himself emphasized to his conscripting officers that mobilizing on the basis of faith was the most efficient way of recruiting Egyptian peasants:

> …they should not be dragged into the army by force. We have to attract their minds to it [. . .]. This can be done by employing some preachers who should convince the fellahin that [serving in the army] is not like corve´e. [. . .] Alternatively, we can remind them of how easy it was for the French [while they were in Egypt] to collect Copts to serve in their army due to their eagerness to serve their faith. If that was the case with the Copts, it will certainly be more so with the fellahin whose hearts have been enflamed by their religiosity and their zeal in defending Islam. (Fahmy 1997, 429)

During the modernization processes of the Muhammad 'Ali dynasty, many Copts climbed the social ladder, and retained their positions as elite secretaries. Some also became part of the indigenous landholding class. However, they did not become part of the ruling class itself (Elsässer 2011, 13-14). When Muhammad 'Ali started recruiting indigenous Egyptians for a national army in 1822, Copts were exempted because as *dhimma*, they were not supposed to bear arms. In 1850, however, the Ottoman army was officially opened to Copts, although the higher ranks remained closed to both indigenous Muslims and Copts until 1882. Conscription of Copts became routine before 1860 (Elsässer 2011, 18-21). This was a result of the changes made in the personal status laws by Muhammad 'Ali's successors. Khedive Sa'id renounced his claim of the *jizya* tax in 1854, and began drafting non-Muslims into the army in 1856 (Ibrahim 2011, 20). This was followed by a lifting of the restrictions against Christians and Jews in 1879 under Khedive Tawfiq, allowing non-Muslims to again ride horses and bear arms (Scott 2010, 38). This was in line with an Ottoman law that confirmed the provisions of religious equality within the empire. Yet, many Copts did not favour this change. For example, in Asyut, a largely Christian city in Upper Egypt, there was a huge amount of complaints about the lack of support to the families whose men had been drafted into the army (Ibrahim 2011, 21).[10] Paul Sedra asserts:

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[10] Resistance towards the conscription policies of Mohammad 'Ali and his successors came not only from Copts but also from the Egyptian peasantry (*fellahin)* in general (see Fahmy 1997, 1998).

> When Copts throughout the land discovered that their traditional bargain with the state was void—that, though no longer required to pay the jizya, they faced conscription—they bombarded Pope Kirollos IV with requests for intervention, as was customary in such circumstances under the millet arrangement. (Sedra 1999, 224)

Consequently, the Coptic pope intervened with the government in order to exempt Copts from military service (Ibrahim 2011, 18).[11] Another arrangement was then made that gave Copts the option to either conscribe or pay another tax, called the *bedel*, levied on all adult non-Muslim males who chose not to serve.[12] Although Copts complained that this tax was a new form of *jizya*, the tax option was widely preferred over conscription.

Because of Muhammad 'Ali's conquests beyond Egyptian borders, the European powers intervened, aiming to preserve the status quo in the Middle East. Under foreign pressure, the military shrank to a rather small force by the end of 'Ali's reign and thereby lost some of its importance for the Egyptian state. Egypt was invaded by Britain in 1882, which kept ruling the country for the next 70 years. The British further reduced the size of the army to only 6,000 men in 1882, and British officers constituted 10 per cent of the officer corps (Hashim 2011a).

In 1909, the *bedel* was abolished, and military service for all males, regardless of religion, was introduced. Interestingly, Scott observes that the same year saw an increase in the emigration of non-Muslims (2010, 38). Under the British, the Coptic Christians became much a part of the "liberal" elite and many Copts held seats in parliament (Soliman 2009, 138). This time period also saw the formation of a Coptic community council, the *Majlis al-Milli,* which developed close ties with the British. This resulted in the favouring of Copts over Muslims for positions in the growing administration. In 1911, they took up 45 per cent of the positions in the bureaucracy (31 per cent in the war ministry), and were also heavily overrepresented at all levels of education. At the time the Copts also grew economically, and some historians estimate that by 1914, they owned approximately 50 per cent of Egypt's wealth (Ibrahim 2011, 44-45, 49). In 1908, the Copt Boutros Ghali Pasha was appointed prime minister, but was assassinated two years later by a radical nationalist. The same year of the assassination a national Coptic congress was held, where an assembly of five hundred Copts formulated a list of common Coptic grievances. This was much to the despair of Egypt's nationalist newspapers and associations, who wanted to unite Copts and Muslims against the colonial administration. From then on, prominent Copts increasingly became part of the growing nationalist movement that opposed the British protectorate. They supported and held positions in Sa'd Zaghlul's *Wafd* (delegation), which later became the dominant political party. In the 1919 revolt, Copts played a role both in the diplomatic efforts to gain independence, and in the grass-roots mobilisation. Therefore, the 1919 revolution gained an iconic status as a symbol of unity between Copts and Muslims (Ibrahim 2011, 56-67)

The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 gave formal control of the military force back to Egypt, but the British still controlled training, officers' education, and arms supplies. A key change came in the greater number of Egyptian officers, primarily drawn from the middle class. They opposed the

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[11] Sensing that an era of Church independence and leadership over the community could come to an end, Pope Kirollos IV initiated far-reaching reforms of the Church bureaucracy, as well as the ecclesiastical education system, to preserve the authority of the Church in the Coptic community. This was of little use, however, as the many elite Copts, who had climbed the social ladder through the bureaucratic system, looked at the Church with disfavor. To them, the clergy was an incompetent lot drawn from the ranks of the peasants, not able to meet the challenges of the modern era (Sedra 1999, 224).

[12] The literature reviewed is unclear about whether or not this was a direct consequence of the intervention by Pope Kirollos.

monarchy and British protectorate, and developed political interests and associations within the officer corps. One of these was the nationalistic group of the Free Officers (Hashim 2011a).

3.2   Copts and the EAF under Nasser

The Free Officers made no attempt at hiding their military rank or uniforms when they seized power in 1952. Civilian rule was openly rejected with the ousting of liberal-leaning General Mohammed Naguib and inauguration of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954 (Springborg and Henry 2011). The coup plotters did not have much ideological ambitions beyond independence. On the contrary, the officer corps were ideologically divided, and Nasser's Egypt was referred to as "a military society" (Hashim 2011a, 68). The ruling military elite was for most of the time not aligned with a social class, and the share of officers in the cabinet ranged from 32 to 65 per cent in the Nasser era. As such, in the first years after the overthrow of the monarchy, Egypt was an openly military dictatorship, and the ruling officers' policy choices were based more on strategic considerations than a commitment to wider principles (see Goldberg 2013b). Gradually, however, a distinction between the ruling elite and the majority of the officer corps began to appear. To not depend solely on the armed forces in cases of internal turmoil, Nasser created the Central Security Forces (CSF), an anti-riot force, in 1968, following the popular protests that year. The CSF was enlarged by Anwar Sadat in the early 1970s, and Mubarak further expanded it, while at the same time developing state security into a more sophisticated internal deterrent for the population (Springborg 2009, 10-11).

The Free Officers only had one Coptic member in its ranks, and while the new Nasserist nationalism had a secular label attached to it, it also had strong Islamic overtones. Moreover, many members of the Free Officers were known sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hashim 2011a). 1957 saw the introduction of religion as a mandatory subject in public schools, and the use of religious symbols became a feature of political discourse (Scott 2010, 42). The military dissolved all political parties, including the Wafd, where many Copts had prominent positions. Initially, this move got a mixed reaction from the Coptic community. To some, al-Wafd was associated with the corrupt rule of King Farouk, and Coptic organizations were receptive to Naguib's rhetoric of *taṭhīr* (modernisation and reform). As a result, the Church hierarchy was purged, and several ecclesiastical figures charged with corruption (Ibrahim 2011, 156, 160-162).

The military regime soon found it necessary with some form of Coptic representation in government. The president therefore granted himself the privilege of appointing ten members of parliament every year, and saw to it that at least some Copts were among the appointed. Additionally, the government established a norm to include at least one Coptic minister in every cabinet (Soliman 2009, 138-139).[13] Yet, this was only a token of representation, and could not at all match the important positions that were held by Copts in the Wafd party prior to the 1952 coup. When it comes to other parts of the state apparatus and bureaucracy, the upper echelons have been largely reserved for Muslims since 1952

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[13] Some academics claim that there has been a modern "millet system" in place after 1952 (see for example Sedra 1999, 2009; Soliman 2009; Scott 2010). Millet (*milla*) refers to a contract between the Ottoman sultan and religious minority groups with monotheistic religions (*dhimma*) living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, allowing these groups certain rights of autonomy (Scott 2010, 28). The reason this term has been used in relation to the Coptic minority in modern times is related to the political role granted to the Church, referred to in section 2 and discussed further below. To term this relationship a "millet partnership" may however be historically misleading, as the Copts were not considered part of the officially organized Christian millets in the Ottoman Empire. The term therefore suggests a false historical continuity (Elsässer 2011, 100-101).

(Elsässer 2011, 97). According to Scott (2010) this is also true for the upper echelons of the armed forces, which in the aftermath of 1952 boosted its political influence.

To maintain control of the armed forces, Nasser appointed a close friend, Abdel Hakim Amer, as Commander-in-Chief, a move that did not bring about the expected results. Under Amer's command the military turned into an independent political power centre, which eventually created a crisis in civil-military relations.[14] After a failed attempt by Nasser to remove Amer in 1961, few attempts were made to reassert political control over the officers. Amer and his closest cronies grew wealthy, especially after reaping the benefits of resources provided for the Egyptian involvement on the republican side of the civil war in North Yemen. After the humiliating defeat in the six-day war with Israel in 1967, Amer and his powerbase were finally removed, but a taste for military independence remained among middle-ranking and senior officers (Hashim 2011a, 2011b).

3.3   Copts and the EAF under Sadat

Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Nasser after his death in 1970, was more able and willing to confront the military. After the war with Israel in 1973 there was also a growing sense of professionalism and realism among Egyptian generals. This corresponded with a decrease in available resources for military spending, resulting in a change of focus from offensive capabilities towards upholding a certain level of national defence. Therefore, among senior officers, the subsequent Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1978 may not at first have been exceedingly ill-perceived, but rather seen as a necessary step to uphold Egyptian national interests (as it would diminish the biggest threat to Egyptian borders). Once it became apparent, however, that the treaty would not involve other Arab countries, and therefore alienate Egypt from the rest of the Arab world, many officers became more sceptical. Sceptical officers in the top ranks were replaced with Sadat loyalists, such as Vice President Mubarak and Defence Minister Abu Ghazala. Hence, loyalty to the president was imperative for promotion within the top ranks. However, Sadat could not control the Islamist officers in the junior corps—eventually resulting in his assassination in 1981 (Hashim 2011a, 68-76).

The losses in 1967 had caused Egyptians to rethink the Nasserist secular ideology, and the General Command to put greater emphasis on Islam to develop pride and confidence within the armed forces. As stated by General Mahfouz, "*Al-Jihad* was to be the fighting ideology of the army, with 'victory or martyrdom' and '*Allahu Akbar*' as the battle cry" (Gawrych 2000, 85). This was blended with Egyptian patriotism and Arab nationalism. In a time where all Egyptians were needed to rally around the flag, one did not want to risk the alienation of Egypt's Coptic minority. Therefore, the grand sheikh of Al-Azhar, Abdel-Halim Mahmoud, extended the notion of holy war and martyrdom to non-Muslims as well. According to Gawrych, the twentieth century saw the development of a national, rather than a Muslim army, and "Copts rose up to the ranks of the officer corps into positions of responsibility" (2000, 86). This claim, however, is debateable, at least if one considers the parallel developments of increased support of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian society (Ibrahim 1981, 76). Sadat's tolerance, if not his outright blessing, of an ideology that saw Islam and politics as inseparable, caused him to ratify a constitution with the new controversial article 2, stating that "Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic the official language, the principles of Islamic *shari'a* are a main source of legislation" (Scott 2010, 46). The Islamization process under Sadat marginalized the Copts and caused an outburst of writings that discussed the position of Islam toward the *dhimma*

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[14] This is not to say that the EAF in this period was very effective. Between 1955 and 1966, when the military's power was at its peak domestically, the armed forces were at their worst in terms of military effectiveness, which can be illustrated by the poor performance in the Suez War (Hashim 2011b, 69).

(Scott 2010). The tension between the Coptic community and the state culminated in Sadat's decision to exile Pope Shenouda to a monastery in Wadi Natrun (Sedra 1999).

According to historian Akram Tadros (interviewed by author, 14 August 2013), there has only been one publicly known Coptic general in the history of the EAF. This was Fuad Aziz Ghali, whom Sadat made commander of the second field army at the commencement of the 1973 war. While Aziz Ghali may be the only example of a Coptic general, he also illustrates the contradictions of the EAF's ideology. He was made general at a time where Islamic faith had re-emerged as a major source of morale within the armed forces, following the great loss in the 1967 war (Gawrych 2000, 85-86).

Illustrating the flow of high-ranking officers from the military to positions of political authority, Aziz Ghali was appointed governor of southern Sinai towards the end of his career. He also presented himself as proof that there was no discrimination against Copts in Egypt:

> There is no discrimination between Copts and Muslims. The proof of this is that I was chosen, during the October 1973 War, as commander of the Second Army, which is certainly a Muslim army. Had there been discrimination on religious grounds, there were many others who could have taken the post. (Nassar 2000)

According to Pennington (1982, 169) most Copts were unimpressed by Ghali's appointment, and saw it only as a superficial gesture.

3.4 Copts and EAF under Mubarak

In October 1981, President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Khalid Islambuli, a member of the militant Islamic Jihad (*Jihād al-Islami*) at a military parade (Schwedler 2010, 128). Next to him on the podium sat Coptic Bishop Samuel, who served as a representative and government liaison for the Church while Pope Shenouda was under house arrest in Wadi Natrun. Samuel was killed by a grenade along with Sadat (Weldon 1981). In the time following the assassination, supporters of the assassins carried out armed attacks against both government property and Coptic Christians. On the orders of the government, military special forces were airlifted into the area of the attacks and brought an end to the violence (Hashim 2011b, 106; The Estimate 2000). These events set a precedent for the alliance between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian government, and to some extent the armed forces, in the Mubarak era.

However, while the succeeding president, Mubarak, jumped straight from command of the Egyptian Air Force to the position of vice-president, he had reserves about involving the armed forces in internal security operations. The assassination of Sadat had triggered fears that there was in fact an ongoing infiltration by Islamists in the junior officer corps and among conscripts in the armed forces. Following an investigation by a central oversight committee, it was concluded that poverty and economic distress were the main reasons behind the growth of Islamist militancy. As such, illiterate and poor conscripts were excluded from service in the military, and instead sent to serve in the CSF, in which they would have fewer opportunities to advance to positions of authority (Hashim 2011b, 107-108). As the CSF served primarily as an anti-riot force, it contributed cheap labour to enforce Mubarak's authoritarian rule. This establishment, accompanied by the strengthening of other branches of police and internal security, made Mubarak less dependent on the authority of the armed forces. Additionally, the armed forces were granted economic autonomy to build and run a military industrial business complex, shielded from public oversight (Hashim 2011b, 109; Albrecht and Bishara 2011, 14).

Under Mubarak's rule the state security forces grew to a previously unseen size. The staff of the CSF and the General Intelligence Agency, tasked with internal surveillance, were not particularly fond of their camouflaged counterparts. The armed forces kept a privileged position in the national budget. EAF officers are generally better paid than security force officers. They have more perks, in the form of retired officers' clubs, designated housing in the Cairo suburbs, and higher pensions. All while maintaining a good image with the population, as they do not have to carry out tasks related to internal security. For these tasks, Hosni Mubarak built a sophisticated anti-riot force, which includes agents in civilian attire that infiltrate the public, and so-called "thugs" working within the counter-riot forces (Springborg 2009).

On the one hand, this divide between various security institutions served to create distance between the president and the armed forces. On the other hand it served to hide the political power of the high officer establishment of the armed forces from the public. For example, the "farmers' and workers' quota" in the Egyptian parliament was systematically abused to fast-track retired EAF personnel into the People's Assembly. According to Amr Moussa, former secretary general of the Arab League and presidential candidate in the 2011 elections, 90 per cent of the "farmers" were actually former military officers (Martini and Taylor, 2011). Once they were granted a seat in parliament, these legislators would typically join the Defense and National Security Committee, the only body in the Egyptian government that supervises the military, watering down civilian oversight of the EAF (Martini and Taylor 2011, 132). Furthermore, a vast portion of the state budget is allocated to defence spending. While the official share of the total state spending is 7 per cent, the real number is likely to be higher, due to the vast upgrades in military equipment during the last decade. Additionally, most of the aid that flows into Egypt from the United States has been earmarked for military spending (Springborg and Henry 2011).

Accurate facts concerning the EAF materiel and personnel are hard to come by. It is difficult to be accurate about the number of Coptic officers and conscripts serving in the Egyptian military. According to Scott, "there are hardly any high-ranking Copts in the military, police force, judiciary, or diplomatic corps […] They tend to be excluded from the intelligence service and the presidential staff and are underrepresented among Egypt's regional governors" (Scott 2010, 83). As such, the underrepresentation of Copts is a trend that characterizes large parts of the state apparatus, rather than just the military.

Pennington (1982) suggested that the Egyptian regime consciously reduced the Coptic presence in several sectors of public employment. The number of Copts in public employment has remained low. Instead, Copts seek professions in private enterprise, and are overrepresented in the fields of law, medicine, and journalism. Copts are also overrepresented in financial enterprises. Of the private investment companies founded between 1974 and 1993, Copts owned 22.5 per cent (Scott 2010, 84).

When discussing employment in the armed forces, and conscription specifically, one should also take into consideration the opinions of certain Muslim conservatives. Even if with recent events the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood and likeminded movements seems to have decreased, many of them still have strong popular support. Consider, for example, the statements by Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the mid-1980s, and by the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood Mustafa Mashhur in 1997, that Copts should not serve in the military since their loyalty cannot be trusted (Scott 2010, 101). The 2007 draft Party Platform of the Brotherhood also reflects their mixing of religion and state, and consequently the Islamic basis of war making: "The decision to go to war represents a decision according to Islamic law, that must be based upon the goals and fundamentals as defined by Islamic law" (Scott 2010, 101). To what extent such opinions are reflected in the Egyptian population or military is difficult to establish. However, an indication may be that Egypt has seen a growing Salafist

movement, which typically calls for the subordination of non-Muslims in an Islamic system (Elsässer 2011, 259; Iskander 2012, 112).

Within the limits of research for this report, it was not possible to analyse differences in the way Copts and Muslims are enrolled as conscripts today. All Egyptian boys are subject to conscription, unless they are the only sons in the household. As in other countries, exemptions are made based on medical reasons, with several options as to how to conduct the national service (Gawrych 2000). Lacking good data on Coptic individual experiences with the armed forces in recent time, it is more fruitful to look into interactions between groups of Copts, Coptic institutions, and military units and representatives. Below I provide an account of several such interactions, and the recent developments in the relationship between the Coptic and military leadership.

The context of these interactions corresponds to the first years of Mubarak's presidency, when the Church-state relationship took a new turn. Specifically, when Shenouda was released from house arrest, imposed by President Sadat in 1981, he formed an alliance with the Mubarak regime. In return for keeping the Copts cooperative, the Church was granted access to negotiate directly with state officials on certain matters. According to Coptic political scientist Samer Soliman, the Church assumed a political role in approving Coptic MP's to the lower house of parliament (the People's Assembly or *Majlis al-Sh'ab*) after 1952. Pope Shenouda, however, was different from his predecessor in that he sought personal political leadership over the Coptic community. Facing a strengthening current of political Islam, the Copts gathered behind the clerical leadership, whose status had significantly increased since the first quarter of the twentieth century (Soliman 2009). The Church's alliance with the government found its legitimacy in the alleged protection of the Copts by the state.

4. Local and central Coptic-military interactions: encroachment, mediation, "reconciliation"

In the Islamist insurgency of the 1990s, the military provided intelligence analyses and military trials, while the work on the ground was carried out by CSF and the national police force (Owen 1994, 198; Hashim 2011b, 110-111). The intended non-involvement of the Egyptian military in internal affairs has historically spared it from meddling with Egypt's thorny sectarian issues. Thereby, it could promote itself as the upholder of Egyptian national unity. National unity has, since the 2011 uprising, become the much-repeated mantra in periods of military rule.

Generals shun political forces that represent distinct societal cleavages because they obstruct the image of society as an organic whole (Albrecht and Bishara 2011, 22). Sectarian tensions between Christians and Muslims represent the biggest challenge to this image. As such, in situations where state security has had to intervene in sectarian disputes, the acting authority has usually been the CSF or local police. The military and the Copts have rarely dealt with each other as groups. There are exceptions however, where local military units, with or without the knowledge of the central military command, have intervened in sectarian issues, or committed atrocities towards local Coptic communities. One such example in the pre-2011 era was the land dispute at Patmos.

4.1   The Patmos land dispute

The Patmos project is a Coptic charity that was initiated in 1993, primarily to offer a care centre for the mentally disabled. It has also hosted different spiritual activities and social services. The charity is situated on land purchased by Bishop Botros of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The plot of land was

coincidentally placed next to an Egyptian army base, located on the Cairo-Suez road, approximately 30 km east of Cairo. In December 1996, the neighbouring army unit, without preliminary warning, broke through the outer walls of Patmos, and went on to tear down several buildings inside the premises. This act was repeated in January 1997. According to a report by Cornelis Hulsman at the Arab West Report (2004),[15] the officers at the military base believed Bishop Botros was establishing a convent on the premises. In 2002, the same army unit used a bulldozer to tear down parts of the fence and some of the trees on the property.

The church leaders at the Patmos Centre tried to contact several branches of the authorities to prevent further harassment, including the local police and central government offices. When they felt that another "attack" was imminent in 2003, they took the step of issuing a press release about the previous incidents, generating bad publicity in both local and foreign press for the Egyptian authorities (Hulsman 2004).

The motivation behind these acts is unclear. It is documented that the acts were committed with the supervision, or at least awareness, of higher officers, and that they were carried out without the proper legal authority. The military unit disregarded legal documents presented by the Patmos Centre that certified their right to operate on the premises (Hulsman 2004).

There is not enough evidence to suggest that the military unit next to Patmos was acting on the basis of sectarian animosity, even though this was the interpretation given by Christian media outlets. "Church in Chains," an Irish charity organization and mediator of Christian news, reported that the official pretext for the military action was a law passed in 2003, requiring all buildings to be at least 100 meters away from the Cairo-Suez road. The workers at Patmos were cited, claiming that the attack against them was discriminatory nonetheless. Many adjacent buildings, including 15 mosques and the army base itself, they said, were placed much closer to the road. The article further reports that Church leaders blamed the minister of defence, who allegedly had opposed the centre since 1997. They further believed that the repeated actions against the centre were a result of anti-Christian prejudice amongst Muslim officers (Barnabas Fund 2004).

While there are few other instances of Coptic-military interactions in the Mubarak era, the time following his ouster saw a period of direct military rule. The political developments of this period allow for reflection on the relationship between the military leadership and leadership of the Church.

4.2 The Copts under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

After January 2011, the threats and violence against Coptic Christians increased. The lack of security and law enforcement allowed groups of radical Islamists to target churches and Copts without the risk of sanctions. At least 12 incidents of serious sectarian violence occurred during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which left at least 25 people dead and only resulted in prosecution in two of the cases (Human Rights Watch 2012).[16]

In her 2012 publication "Sectarian conflict in Egypt," Elizabeth Iskander asked a timely question. Namely, if observers were witnessing the formation of a Church-SCAF pact. The background for

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[15] The Arab West Report provides translation of Egyptian media, and reporting and analysis of the situation for Egypt's Christians.

[16] See also Tadros (2013, 140) and Amnesty's 2013 report for a detailed overview of sectarian incidents in 2011, 2012 and 2013.

asking this question was the long relationship between Pope Shenouda and President Mubarak, discussed above. The Church leadership and the alliance with the regime had its legitimacy in the alleged protection of the Copts by the state. Therefore, assuming that this relationship would continue in the next regime, the Church welcomed the transfer of power to the SCAF. Accordingly, Pope Shenouda initially discouraged the anti-regime protests at Maspero, which continued through the summer and autumn of 2011. When the military responded to these protests in October, it was clear that the old Church-regime pact was no longer working. The Church had failed to contain Coptic youth from voicing their demands, and the SCAF had failed to protect the Copts from sectarian attacks (Iskander 2012; interviews by author).

Efforts were made in the aftermath of the Maspero Massacre to reconstitute the Church-regime relationship. A meeting between central figures of both the SCAF and the Church (including the pope) was held, where parties negotiated an investigation of the incident, as well as a response to Coptic grievances. Shenouda's strategy of acting as a mediator between the state and the Copts was therefore relatively unchanged.

One of the tools used to enforce the results of the mediation during Mubarak's presidency were reconciliation meetings, which brought together local religious leaders of communities in which a sectarian incident had taken place. The leaders then negotiated a response to such incidents, usually without addressing the root causes of the problem. The SCAF chose to continue using reconciliation councils to mediate sectarian conflict. However, this mechanism failed to operate with success in the post-2011 context. The dissatisfaction with the results of these meetings could now be voiced on the streets, and the new civil society organisations in Cairo could bring the grievances in the villages to Cairo. The reconciliation meetings' failure to compensate the victims of sectarian violence, as well as the lack of prosecution against the perpetrators, caused the intensification of Coptic demonstrations with every sectarian incident that occurred (Iskander 2012, 83, 167-168).

Despite efforts by both the Church and the regime to initiate a closer cooperation between the generals and the clergy, the emerging Coptic civil society caused such an alliance to be less meaningful than under Mubarak's presidency. This civil society consists of organizations that were established towards the latter half of the 2000s and organizations and activist groups established during and after the 2011 uprising. Most prominent is the Maspero Youth Union, which was formed in the wake of the Maspero massacre. Many of these organizations, as well as many Coptic politicians, took on the view that the Church was not fit to represent the Copts politically. Coptic civil society continued to operate under President Morsi, eventually taking part in the campaign against him and his government (interviews by author December 2012, January 2013).

Protest march in Shubra, Cairo under President Morsi's rule. Photo: Lars Gunnar Christiansen.

Two episodes of local violence are especially relevant to this report. First there was an incident in the desert of Wadi Natrun, approximately 140 km north of Cairo, where the monastery of St. Bishoy was attacked by the local army unit, in a manner similar to the Patmos incident. Second, there was a negotiation following a local attack, and eventual rebuilding of a torched church in the village of Sol.

4.3 The attack at St. Bishoy

On 22 February 2011, soldiers of the EAF attacked the monastery of St. Bishoy in Wadi Natrun, using live ammunition, and injuring at least four people. The monks there were accused of building a fence without an official permit (Tadros 2013a, 144). The incident is under-reported, with the exception of a video on YouTube, and some blog articles written about the event. The video shows an army unit, the size of a platoon, and approximately five army vehicles, including armoured personnel carriers with mounted machine guns, and a bulldozer. Monks and other civilians apparently tried to stop the soldiers, to which the army unit responded by firing shots and chasing them. It is unclear whether the army unit intentionally aimed at people whilst firing guns, but the video shows bleeding civilians being carried away from the scene. The army unit then razed the brick walls and gates surrounding the monastery, before they loaded up on their vehicles and left the scene (Abdelmassih 2011). The army later stated that the monks had constructed the walls on state-owned land, and that these were the only structures that were razed by the unit. The documentation supports this argument, but it also shows an

excessive use of force by the soldiers. It is also worth asking why the army, with thousands of unlicensed residential structures being built every year, specifically targeted the monastery (Abdelmassih 2011; Tadros 2013a, 144-145).

4.4 The arson and rebuilding of a church in Sol

On 5 March 2011, a church was set on fire and burnt to the ground in the village of Sol, just south of Cairo. Further, an unknown number of Christian residences and shops were burned and looted. In this incident, the armed forces were not directly involved in the attack, but controlled the reconciliation process that followed, and the rebuilding of the church (Tadros 2013a). According to one investigative report, some soldiers also witnessed the arson, but did not intervene (Hulsman 2013, 83). Afterwards, the SCAF initiated a reconciliation meeting. Under Mubarak, the State Security Investigations Apparatus, a body of the Interior Ministry, had organized these meetings. A major change under SCAF's reign was that the reconciliation meetings were organized by Salafi sheikhs.[17] For the reconciliation committee in Sol, the armed forces had Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, a renowned public figure in Egypt, manage the meetings. At the first meeting it was agreed, with the blessing of the armed forces, not to try the perpetrators, and reconstruct the church on the edge of town. When this decision was made public, Coptic activists in Cairo gathered outside the Maspero building to protest. This spurred the army to rebuild the church at the same location, although the arsonists and looters were not put on trial (Tadros 2013a, 152; Hulsman 2013, 83-84).

A team of 100 army engineers rebuilt the church on SCAF's direct orders, at a cost of two million Egyptian pounds (USD 350,000). They also rebuilt an adjacent conference centre that had been destroyed (Hammer 2011). During this reconstruction project, the national newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported that a delegation of Copts and priests was sent from Sol to Cairo. Their task was to calm down the Coptic protestors outside Maspero. The article does not specify whether this delegation was an outcome of the reconciliation meeting (Ahram Online 2011). However, the event indicates that the EAF's intention of rebuilding the church was partly to reduce the calamities in the capital, and bolster the image of the armed forces.

The influence of Salafis was also visible in other instances of sectarian conflict mediation at the time. In one example a Coptic man who was tormented by his landlord complained to the local Salafist sheikh, who then negotiated a solution between the two men. In another case, a reconciliation council was put together after a Copt had offended a Muslim family. The council included both Salafist sheiks and army officers. The outcome of the reconciliation meeting was that three entire Coptic families was expelled from the town. Under SCAF, no one was tried and found guilty of any crimes related to sectarian assaults. Instead, victims of such assaults were often arrested and accused of instigating sectarian tension (Tadros 2013a, 149-154).

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[17] The Salafists are Sunni Muslim conservatives, associated with a strict and puritanical approach to Islam. The Salafi current calls for the subordination of non-Muslims in an Islamic system (Elsässer 2011, 259).

5. The Copts and the rise and fall of Mohammed Morsi

The clashes between Copts and Muslims, which had increased in frequency after the 2011 uprising, continued under the rule of president Morsi, who assumed the presidency in June 2012. Sixteen people were wounded in the village of Dashour in August, and large clashes broke out in a village near Aswan in February 2013. Sectarian tension peaked in April, when images of clashes at the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo were broadcasted worldwide (BBC News 2012; Ahram Online 2013; Waguih and Laessing 2013). The lack of response from security forces to Islamist aggression was therefore an important issue under Morsi's presidency (Tadros 2013a).

As such, it seemed that the Coptic community's biggest fear had come true. Democratic elections would lead to Islamist rule and worsen living conditions for Egypt's non-Muslims. One could therefore assume that Copts would seek to ally with the EAF—or at least with its top generals—which proved willing to face the Muslim Brotherhood with all necessary means.

The removal from office of President Mohamed Morsi by the Egyptian Armed Forces on 3 July 2013, following massive protests in Cairo and other Egyptian cities, brought Egyptian generals on the front pages of newspapers across the world. Fierce debates about the legitimacy of Morsi's rule followed this event. Those regarding elections as the key for democratic legitimacy have held that Morsi should have ruled until new elections were held (e.g., Bandow 2013). Others have argued that Morsi's acts to concentrate all political power in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood have made his rule illegitimate. Essentially, there is disagreement over whether or not Morsi and the Brotherhood should be considered democratic rulers. Within Egypt, the two fronts have consisted of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of the president on the one side, and the opposition on the other. Most Copts belong to the second front, in opposition to the Brotherhood and arguing against the legitimacy of the former president. However, the removal of the Brotherhood president was, and remains, an act with ambiguous consequences for the Coptic community.

A man holds up the cross and the Quran during a protest, to signal the unification of Egyptians despite religious differences. Although Copts were often in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, they did not wish to alienate the country's Muslim majority. Photo: Nicolas Rigal.

In spite of the fact that the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in government was a potential hazard for the advancement of Coptic rights and security, peaceful alternations of government would have the potential of dampening sectarian conflict in the long run. Not allowing Islamist hardliners to complete their terms in office, renders them a rationale for pursuing non-peaceful methods to voice their discontent (see Hafez and Wiktorowicz 2004, 66-67). Through the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant Islamist threat in Egypt came from the political violence of radical and organized groups, who initiated deterring operations with only a few acting individuals (Schwedler 2010, 126-129). Such a threat could be defeated militarily, hence the successful counterinsurgency by Egyptian security forces in the 1990s (see Gerges 2000). Even though some analysts (e.g., Trager 2013; McBain 2013) are claiming that Egypt is facing a new and similar insurgency, the violence that we see today is of a more sporadic, collective nature, and more unpredictable in its timing and location (Drevon 2013). Not providing Islamists with incentives to initiate such acts is therefore decisive to foster a more peaceful society. The political marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups can be considered precisely such an incentive.

The basis for this argument is illustrated by the attacks against Coptic churches and individuals during and after the demonstrations and ousting of Morsi. Islamist preachers proclaimed Christians the conspirators of the demonstrations and removal of Mohamed Morsi. This was enough to trigger the outrage of mobs in both urban peripheries and villages, which subsequently burned churches to the ground, and destroyed Coptic homes (Tadros 2013b; EIPR 2013; Amnesty International 2013).

A conspiracy theory, where the Coptic community and Egyptian generals jointly work against the Muslim Brotherhood, may figure as a likely event, even to the outside observer. After all, the Copts have long feared the consequences of Islamist rule, and the Egyptian military has a history of combating the Islamist insurgency. The theory could perhaps be reinforced by the images of Pope Tawadros on stage with al-Sisi during the announcement of the political roadmap after the armed forces' takeover. It is also well known that the Coptic business tycoon Naguib Sawiris was among those who contributed funds to the political campaign against Morsi (Hubbard and Kirkpatrick 2013).

However, as I have demonstrated in this paper, despite the common interest in removing Islamists from governmental offices, an alliance between the Copts and the Egyptian armed forces does not necessarily follow. The observations above reveal considerable tension in the relations between the armed forces and the Coptic community, visible in policies of conscription, the involvement of the EAF in resolving sectarian disputes, and the role of both the EAF and the Church in national politics. As has also been noted by Robert Springborg at the Naval Postgraduate School in California (2013), there is reason to doubt the supposed secularity of the Egyptian armed forces. I do not want to conclude that this is a conscious strategy on the part of the military leadership, or that there is a lack of ideological control over military staff. No matter the reason, it appears that the military is reluctant to take a firm stand to protect Coptic communities from outside threats.

5.1   Unable or unwilling to protect?

Human Rights Watch reported, during the backlash against the Copts after Morsi's fall, that the security forces did not sufficiently step up to provide Coptic communities with protection against violence from Brotherhood supporters. Many of these attacks went on for long periods of time. In Naga Hassan, ten kilometers west of Luxor in southern Egypt, attacks went on for 17 hours uninterrupted, resulting in the destruction of more than 20 Christian-owned properties. Security forces failed to intervene during the unfolding of these events, but in some instances investigated afterwards (Human Rights Watch 2013). In the city of Delga in Minya, of approximately 120,000 inhabitants, severe instances of harassment, extortion, looting, and arson went on for more than two months, after Islamists took control of the city in July 2013. *The Guardian* reported that more than 100 Christian families fled the city as a result of the events. Not until September a joint assault by army and police forces managed to retake the city (Kingsley 2013). *Madamasr*, an independent Egyptian news site, reported that 72 arrests were made during the operation. The local population claimed that these arrests were wrongful and rudimentary, and that many of the real assailants ran free (Antoun and Afify 2013).

Also in September, General al-Sisi reportedly swore personally to U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel that Copts are protected by society and security forces (al-Gendi 2013). While it appears from the reports above that this protection is in fact not taking place, whether this can be blamed on inability or unwillingness on the part of the military leadership is still an open question. In the case of Delga, where the military apparently was involved on the ground, one should note that the Islamists there were not only harassing Copts, but also challenged the state authorities by taking control of the city. As I have described above, the local police is usually the one responsible for dealing with cases of sectarian violence. The military leadership would, however, have the authority to give priority to these sorts of incidents, and usher the internal security forces into action. For example, representatives of both the military and police constitute the majority in the National Defense Council, which is in power to authorize any strategy to deal with "crisis in 'all their forms', and adopt the necessary measures for their containment" (Goldberg 2013b). As such, it can be argued that the military leadership has the possibility to raise Muslim-Christian relations on the agenda, and implement more effective measures to provide for the security of the Copts. However, as the EAF have had a more visible political role after the summer of 2013, any such decision has the potential of falling back on

their popularity. Now that al-Sisi seems to be a likely candidate for the 2014 presidential elections, he must step carefully in order not to damage his public image.

5.2   The Rabea crackdown – forgiving an "old" enemy?

Amnesty reported that 1,089 people were killed in the break-up of the pro-Morsi protest camps at Rabea al-Adaweya in August 2013. The Brotherhood had staged large sit-ins in Cairo during the summer to object to what they considered an illegitimate coup d'état against an elected president. The acting authority on site seems to have been a mixture of armed forces and internal security personnel. Internal security figured in black, with its anti-riot gear and tear gas cannons, but was clearly assisted by helicopters, bulldozers, and armed personnel carriers from the military. Some army troops were also present on the ground. Live rounds were fired into the large crowds, causing the high number of casualties. Egyptian authorities and their supporters have been persistent in claiming that the Morsi supporters had been spotted with firearms, and that the use of heavy force was necessary. Amidst the violence, President Adli Mansour announced a month-long state of emergency, prompting the armed forces to assist the police and internal security in maintaining law and order (Hersh 2013).

The immediate consequence of these events for the Coptic community was the targeting of churches and Christians by pro-Morsi activists in the wake of the crackdown. A contested number of churches were torched. This might explain the lack of support and sympathy from Coptic civil society for the new victims of military repression, even though these groups only a few months earlier had experienced their own trauma facing the same power apparatus. The strong animosity between these groups, despite their common suffering, is illustrative of how the EAF's oppression of the population does not unite the Egyptian people against them. As was the case with the Maspero Massacre, the pro-Morsi camps were crushed with a disproportional use of force. However, the Islamist activists got very little sympathy from the organizations that were formed in the wake of the brutalities at Maspero in 2011. Coptic civil society organizations circulated footage online of alleged terrorists on the campsites, justifying the attack against them (Maspero Youth Union 2013).

Morsi supporters attacked police stations and churches after the crackdown, while military installations initially were left alone.[18] The military does not run free of criticism, but they are rarely confronted in the same way as the police and other state institutions. The sacredness of the EAF is also visible in the high popularity it has traditionally enjoyed among the general public. This has its roots in a conscious effort to maintain a good public image, and in institutional maneuvering. The Egyptian state is fractionalized in such a way that each body competes with the others for popularity and prerogatives. As was shown in the historical review, the EAF is by far the oldest Egyptian state institution, and has managed to preserve its privileges through its ties with politics. However, the departure from a militaristic rule after the death of Nasser also shielded the military from openly making unpopular political decisions that can potentially disturb its public image. The impression in the public's eye was that suits ran the country, not uniforms. This might be about to change. With the fall of the Mubarak regime, the suits are gone, and the military must prove itself publicly in order to maintain its institutional privileges.

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[18] In the preceding months, military and security forces had increasingly been hit by violent attacks. An al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Sinai has claimed responsibility in many of the occurrences, while the Muslim Brotherhood has denied any affiliation with the incidents. These attacks have seemingly come as a delayed response to Morsi's ouster, however, and not as direct retaliation for the break-up of the camps in August 2013.

6. The balkanized Egyptian state and its consequences

Nathan Brown, a political scientist at the George Washington University, has argued that the Egyptian state is haunted by a process of "balkanization"—a struggle for institutional independence by the various bodies of the bureaucracy and public sector (Brown 2012a, 2012b, 2013). As such, the acts of the military command can be seen in light of its own struggle to preserve its privileged position within the Egyptian state, and in the Egyptian public opinion.

There are several ways to understand balkanization in relation to the observation of military repression and interaction with the civil population. The interactions between Copts and the EAF reveal that the military either encourage or suppress civilian actors according to their own interests. At Maspero, the Coptic activists were targeted by the military because of their activism rather than their religion. True, the Egyptian media used their religion against them to call upon Muslims to "defend the military" (Tadros 2013a, 190), but the function of the crackdown was more to suppress public discontent than the Coptic demands specifically. Egyptian security forces have a long historical record of suppressing Islamist militants. However, the number of casualties suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Rabea crackdown was unprecedented. What we see, therefore, is a military that more than before is willing to directly confront public challengers of its authority, a role that previously had been handled mainly by internal security forces.

At the same time the EAF seems to be trying to play on the winning team in sectarian disputes. The use of Salafist sheiks in reconciliation councils discussed by Mariz Tadros may be a sign of increasing Salafist-leaning sympathies within the armed forces. It may also, however, be a conscious strategy to make sure that the sensibilities of the Muslim majority, in places such as Sol, are not offended. As such, the interventions by the armed forces seem more like a strategy to maintain the armed forces' public image, than efforts to establish social peace and security.

In the incident at the Patmos Centre, the military could have been responding to worries in the Muslim population about the expansion of church activities. The issue of conversion from Islam to Christianity is highly sensitive in Egypt (Iskander 2012; Mahmood 2012; Soliman 2009), and the establishment of a convent in a place with a sparse Coptic population could trigger local fears of conversion attempts, or of the progress of Christianity at the cost of Islam. The true intent of the military could then be considered to be appeasement of the Muslim community, seeking an increase in popularity among the majority of the population.

The documentation also suggested that the defence minister, who is always drawn from military ranks, was the initiator of the operation against the centre. In that case, the Patmos incident illustrates the institutional independence of the EAF. No matter what the underlying motivation, the minister of defence saw it as his prerogative to pursue his or the military's interest, disregarding the domains of other state institutions more suited to deal with property violations. Much of the same can be said for the incident at St. Bishoy, even though there is less documentation available about the motivation for the attack.

I began this report by discussing some theoretical assumptions about the relationship between militaries, religion, and nation-building. The history and institutional independence of the EAF affects nation-building because political and other interests spur actions that serve to divide and rule, rather than serve and unite. The inclusion of Copts in the military under the French, but not under Muhammad 'Ali, the *jizya* and *bedel*, the changing emphasis on Islam within the armed forces, and the exclusion of Copts from the officer corps, show a pattern of tense relationships between the Copts and the military. These observations not only account for the encounters previously referred to in this

report, but also for the extent to which Copts have been granted partnership in the state in comparison to Muslims.

The presence of both the grand sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, and Coptic Pope Tawadros, during al-Sisi's announcement of the so-called political roadmap on 3 July 2013 was a display of the current alignment between al-Azhar, the Church and the EAF.[19] They symbolize an alliance between two religious institutions and the state, which has persisted with varying degrees of continuity between 1952 and today. There have at all times been competitors to these institutions, and recently these competitors have gained a much stronger foothold. The Muslim Brotherhood, challenger of the religious views of al-Azhar, rose from opposition movement to government. The civil Coptic movement, challenger to the Church's relationship with the state, has manifested itself in organizations and activist groups that continuously voice their demands on the street. Only the military has managed to remove its main adversary, the neo-liberal wing of the National Democratic Party, led by former presidential heir Gamal Mubarak and his crew of elite businessmen.

7. Conclusion

This report has built on historical sources, peer-reviewed articles, news media, and data from interviews to shed light on the relationship between the Egyptian Armed Forces and the Coptic community. In the historical overview, I found that the Copts have had a changing role inside and vis-à-vis the military since the occupation by French forces in the seventeenth century, until the coup d'état by the Free Officers in 1952. Religion clearly was important for the mobilization of conscripts towards both the French and Ottoman army, and Copts were not included de facto in the national army before the time of the British protectorate. This seems to be the result of several intervening factors, such as Ottoman law and the efforts of the Church and Coptic community to avoid Coptic conscription.

The lack of Coptic officers in the political movements that formed within the military was an important factor in limiting Coptic influence in the post-1952 regime. The military under Nasser turned into an independent political power centre, forming the basis for the elite officer establishment's influence in Egyptian politics in the time to come. The Copts remained in the periphery of this establishment, thus lacking an important access route into positions as governors and members of parliament. Sadat attempted to control the political power of the military, but still recruited his political allies from the officer corps, including Vice President Hosni Mubarak.

There was a change from Sadat's to Mubarak's presidency in the confrontation with Islamist militants and Islamists inside the armed forces. This served the security concerns of the Copts, and eased the relationship between the Coptic Church and the state, which had suffered during the house arrest of Pope Shenouda under Sadat.

The interactions between the Copts and the military in the modern era illustrate a complicated relationship. The involvement of both local army units and officers from the central command in local conflict resolution between Copts and Muslims indicates that the armed forces usually pay homage to the Muslim majority. At the same time the military strives to build an image of national unity in public, through rhetoric and symbolic gestures, such as the rebuilding of churches.

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[19] They were sided by Mohammed al-Baradei, who represented the secular opposition.

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The fragmentation of the state continues to impede Egyptian politics from evolving. When each state institution struggles for the expansion and preservation of its own prerogatives, vulnerable parts of the society, such as the Copts, are likely to suffer. The military's harsh repression of the Maspero demonstrations and the pro-Morsi camps is not a sustainable method of societal conflict resolution. Neither are the tribal reconciliation councils that the military has sponsored.

8. List of interviews

1. Nathan Phone interview with Mariz Tadros (Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, an independent research institution at the University of Sussex) and Akram Tadros, 14 August 2013.

2. A) Phone interview with Mina Magdy (member of the political committee in the Maspero Youth Union), Cairo, 5 September 2013.

   B) Personal interviews with Mina Magdy, Cairo, 28 November 2012, 14 December 2012, and 16 January 2013.

3. Personal interview with Emad Gad (Coptic former MP, and political analyst at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies), Cairo, 8 January 2013.

4. Personal interview with Copts in the Social Democratic Party (anonymous), Cairo, 15 January 2013.

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This report analyses current and past relations between the Egyptian Coptic Christian community and the Egyptian Armed Forces, discussing contemporary events on the backdrop of historical analysis. Based on a thorough review of secondary sources, as well as data from personal interviews, the report finds that there are clear inconsistencies in the Egyptian military's relationship with the Coptic community. Beneath the military's rhetoric of national unity and symbolic gestures of military-led church reconstructions and reconciliation councils is a personnel base that currently, and historically, has few Copts in its ranks. The military has led several oppressive and discriminative operations directed specifically at Coptic places of worship and Coptic activists.

The implication of these findings is that if national unity can be defined as social peace and tolerance, the Egyptian military has yet to prove that it can play a constructive role in maintaining it. In order to foster a society that is more tolerant than what we see in Egypt today, the political process must be more inclusive than it is in its current state.

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