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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1310)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP)): I'd like to call this meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to order.

This is meeting number 70, Tuesday, March 5, 2013. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the persecution of the Copt community in Egypt.

We have from the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Nadine Sherif Wahab, international advocacy officer.

Welcome. Can you hear me okay?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab (International Advocacy Officer, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies): Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): My name is Wayne Marston. I'm the vice-chair of the subcommittee. Our chair is just a little bit delayed, but we will get started just because our time is so short.

I understand that you had a bit of a drive to get in, a little bit of a complication. It is 8 o'clock there, is it?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes, it is.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): If you'd like to proceed, you can make your statement. We usually have about 10 minutes for that, and then we'll have questions by committee members.

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Perfect.

I have a little bit of documentation, which I will forward to the committee.

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies to speak to you on the issue of religious minorities, especially the Coptic Christians in Egypt.

While the situation for religious minorities in Egypt is very serious, the issue was just as problematic under the Mubarak regime. The issue was, and continues to be, mainly the impunity of sectarian violence rather than specific legal restrictions on religious minorities. This is especially true of violence against the Coptic community. Sectarian violence was not uncommon prior to Mubarak's ouster. In 2010 alone, we had at least six instances of sectarian violence.

On January 6, 2010, in Nag Hammadi, a drive-by shooting on Coptic Orthodox Christians as they were leaving Christmas mass killed six Christians and a Muslim police officer and wounded several more. In the following days, fighting ensued between Muslims and Christians in the surrounding villages, ending with a Christian woman being killed on January 9, 2010.

On January 13, 2010, in Mersa Matruh, an imam incited 250 to 300 Muslims to attack a Coptic Christian church.

On September 10 that same year in Cairo, Egyptian police reportedly utilized excessive force on Christian demonstrators protesting the government's refusal of a licence to build a church extension. Two people were killed and dozens were wounded.

In November 2010 in Qena, more than a dozen Coptic Christian homes and businesses were burned and looted. Security officials imposed a curfew and arrested several Muslims, but no one has been charged.

On November 24, 2010 in Giza, police halted construction on a church-owned building, instigating a clash between police, Muslim bystanders, and Coptic Christians. Two Christians were killed, dozens injured, and more than 150 people were detained.

Most notably, on New Year's Eve, in a lead up to the Egyptian revolution in Alexandria, the bombing of Two Saints Church occurred as Coptic Christians exited a New Year's Eve service. The attack killed 23 people and triggered Christian protests in the streets as well as violence between some Muslims and Christians. This could arguably be viewed as one of the triggers for the January 25 protest that led to the ouster of President Mubarak.

You can find these incidents and much more in the fact sheet on human rights violence and sectarian violence in Egypt. But the problem is more far-reaching than just the Coptic community. It affects the most vulnerable religious communities, and especially those who profess their faith.

The Bahá'í community, which has approximately 5 million followers worldwide, is estimated to be about 2,000 in Egypt. Bahá'ís in Egypt had been tolerated for decades until the passing of Law 263 in 1960, which dissolved Bahá'í spiritual assemblies and institutions. While this law did not criminalize adherents to the Bahá'í faith, it has opened the door for security agencies to subject Bahá'ís in Egypt to harassment, discrimination, and detention, in violation of the constitution and international human rights.

For years, the Egyptian government denied Bahá'ís the right to be recognized on legal official documentation, such as national identification cards, birth certificates, and death certificates. This policy has had serious consequences for the everyday lives of the Bahá'í community. Without this documentation they were left with no official recognition of their marriages and could not receive birth certificates for their children unless they chose to be identified as Christian or Muslim.

In 2009, with the identification issue resolved, identification documents may now include a dash in place of one of the three recognized religions, which are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. This solution still leaves the Bahá'í and other religious minorities unrecognized by the government, which continues to recognize only the three Abrahamic faiths.

While this situation has been resolved, there are some indications that it may become an issue again. Recently the Egyptian minister of education stated that the Bahá'í can go to public school, but will be forced to either attend Christian or Muslim religious classes.

● (1315)

Religious persecution also extends to the Shiite community. The recent case of Mohamed Asfour, a Hazari Shiite clerk, is a prime example. He was sentenced to a year in prison and a fine of more than £100,000 this past July. He was charged with contempt of religion and desecration of a mosque in his area.

His crime was praying in a mosque according to the Shiite faith and representing Shiite viewpoints. He allegedly used a prayer stone, as is seen within the Shiite tradition, which is frowned upon in Sunni Islam. Also, Asfour's in-laws and local Salafis demanded that his wife ask for a divorce, which she did.

There was also an incident on December 5, 2011, when seven Shia were detained as they celebrated Ashura, the day of mourning.

Not only are there these restrictions on religious practices, but there are also restrictions on political participation. While Sunni-oriented political parties like the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi Nour Party were allowed to register and participate in the last parliamentary elections, a Shia-oriented party, the Tahrir Party, was denied registration.

After the revolution, Sunni Islamist parties came to the forefront of Egyptian politics. They won a majority of the Parliament and the presidency. They also dominated the constitutional assembly. While there are major concerns for the protection of human rights under the constitution, article 3 in the new Egyptian constitution actually affords those practising Abrahamic faiths, including Coptics, Christians, and Jews, more rights than under the Mubarak constitution.

But it does have some drawbacks for other religious minorities. Muslims, Christians, and Jews are afforded the right to use their own authorities for issues pertaining to family law. This was not the case in the 1971 Egyptian constitution. While this is a step in the right direction, this does limit the religious freedom to only Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

One major issue with the constitution is constitutional article 10, which states:

> The family is the basis of the society and is founded on religion, morality and patriotism.
>
> The State is keen to preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family, its cohesion and stability, and to protect its moral values, all as regulated by law.

This could have implications for the non-Abrahamic faiths. This could give the state authority, in an attempt to protect the morality of society, to interfere in private family affairs without reference to the individuals' religious backgrounds. This could also affect, as I have said, most religious minorities like the Bahá'ís and the Shiites.

The issue of religious defamation is also a problem. The prosecution of artists like popular actor Adel Emam, and the death penalty sentence passed down in absentia for the producer of *The Innocence of Islam*, are prime examples. These cases are prosecuted not for the religious defamation itself, but for the incitement to sectarian violence.

Less known, but just as important, was the case of Alber Saber. On September 14 last year, at 11 p.m., a crowd gathered in front of Alber's apartment. They were overheard debating going into Alber's apartment and killing him. The crowd, consisting mostly of men, went up and tried to break down the front door.

Alber's mother called the police for protection from the now angry mob that was trying to kill her son. When the police came, instead of dispersing the crowd, they arrested Alber, confiscated his computers and CDs without a warrant, and then proceeded to walk him down through the angry crowd. He was attacked in the street in front of his house while in police custody. At the police station, the arresting officer put him in a cell with inmates accused of violent crimes and told them that Alber had insulted Islam and the Prophet. The inmates severely beat him and cut his neck with a razor. Alber was later charged with and convicted of defamation of religion and is currently serving a three-year sentence.

There is also the exclusion of religious minorities from public offices, more specifically the Coptic and Christian community, and there are the issues of building and church renovations.

● (1320)

The issue with church construction dates back to the time of Muhammad Ali. No law regulates the erection of houses of worship. But building a new church in Egypt requires a presidential permit as well as security clearance from the Egyptian state security apparatus. The procedure can take many years winding its way through the Egyptian bureaucracy or may never get approval at all. While this issue is a bureaucratic nightmare, the bigger issue is not the legal barriers to start construction but the impunity of those who have engaged in sectarian violence, as is the recent case with the church in Shubra El-Kheima.

According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Diocese of Shubra El-Kheima bought a piece of land and got official licence from the concerned authorities to build on it in August 2011. This was in order to expand the building, which had not yet been completed. In mid-October they began construction and fencing of the entire area. Then at about 10 p.m. on Monday, November 5, according to church officials, a number of Muslims carrying firearms and non-legal weapons illegally assembled in front of the land and attacked the construction workers, expelling them and taking hold of the land. They prayed Isha, sang prayers, and attempted to demolish the concrete columns. The next day, hundreds of Muslims gathered on the property, carrying firearms and chanting against the building of the church in the area. Last month, the Governor of Cairo ordered a temporary halt of construction on the property until a solution could be found in the dispute among local residents.

This case is emblematic of that problems that confront many churches facing reconstruction. The lack of rule of law, transparency, and accountability are issues that affect not only the freedom of religion but also all political and cultural rights in Egypt.

In conclusion, the current polarization of the community into Islamist and non-Islamist may give the impression that this isn't a religious issue. But as the attacks have been not only against Christians but have been most voracious against notable secular Muslims, such as Dr. El Baradei, it is obvious that the use of religious rhetoric is an attempt to monopolize power and not just to protect the Islamic religion.

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Thank you very much for your testimony.

Colleagues, we're going to go to six-minute rounds. If we stick to those without going over, we will be able to get everybody out of here in time to get back to the House of Commons for question period.

We'll begin with you, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Sherif, for your presentation, for staying up late, and for enduring the protests on the way in. We greatly appreciate your spending the time with us and giving us this information.

Your opening remarks were heavily weighted with the fact that a lot of the issue regarding religious freedom has to do with sectarian violence. I concur with you. But there's also a role for the state to make sure that these people are protected.

One of the last things you mentioned was El Baradei's case. They purposely brought this person through the angry mob and then, when he was in a jail cell, made the great statement to the other inmates that he offended Islam.

Do you think this is the same as during the Mubarak days, or has there been an amplification of these kinds of instances regarding the state's impunity—and its lack of intervention as well?

● (1325)

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: One issue, and this was most obvious under SCAF rule rather than under the current FJP—which is the Freedom and Justice Party belonging to The Muslim Brotherhood.... It was pretty bad under President Mubarak; it got worse, and seemingly has gotten worse because of the impunity or lack of accountability and lack of rule of law. As I was saying in my statement, the issue is an issue of rule of law and lack of prosecution of those who are committing this violence.

There is obviously accountability on the side of the state. We hold the state accountable, including the Ministry of Interior, in a lot of these issues. They've caused some of these issues and continue to be held culpable on them. But I think there is a distinction, as you saw when I mentioned the Bahá'ís, between the regulatory issues and the allowing of violence that doesn't start with them.

Unlike what happened in Maspero.... Thank you for the opportunity to mention this, because I had forgotten to mention the attack against the Christian protesters in front of the Maspero building where many died. It started a wave of attacks that ended 2011 in rather bloody fashion and then started again, in memory of those attacks, last year.

So yes, there are times when the state is actually culpable, and there have been incidents of state violence against Christians. But this doesn't hold only against the Christian community or in the context of religious freedom; it's also true against a lot of other minorities, and now the opposition as well.

Mr. David Sweet: Exactly.

The other thing that seems to be escalating, though it was also true in Mubarak days, is that the police feel no compunction at all concerning restraint; they use violence without any kind of restraint. This administration has not come out directly, either, with a statement publicly that the police use of force is not unlimited; that there are limitations that should govern police behaviour.

Of course, El Baradei's case is one of them. In that case, have you seen an escalation in the police as well as the military in this regard?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Since it stepped down, when President Morsi came into power, the military hasn't really engaged and has taken a much more neutral role.

But as you would have seen if you had been following the clashes in front of the presidential palace last December, the police were present within earshot of a lot of the attacks against the protesters by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists—against the opposition, not just the Coptic community—and did nothing and therefore are culpable for some of that. Some of the violence included torture chambers right in front of the gates, in which they were torturing members of the opposition, demanding that they admit they had received money and were spies, etc. There are videos online showing proof that they were doing this.

So yes, I think the police are culpable, and there has been, I don't want to say an escalation, but a lack of ability to engage, and maybe even a lack of willingness to stop such violence and do their job.

Mr. David Sweet: I'd like to ask you personally whether, being a champion there in the midst of all this, you fear for your own safety.

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes, at times I do, actually. I engage in international advocacy; therefore I can be, at any point.... This kind of work, talking to the Canadian House of Commons, talking to the U.S. State Department, puts me at risk. But also, being a woman on the streets I'm constantly at risk.

I'm secular, but of the Muslim faith, which puts me.... One of my roommates most recently was Christian. One of the things we would put up with every Friday was a Salafi mosque near my house basically calling for people to commit violence or hate, spewing hate messages against me and my roommate, both clumped in together.

I want to point out that this is not a Coptic Christian versus Islamist situation. This is a use of violent rhetoric by one community to paint the entire opposition, whether Muslim, Christian, Bahá'í, or Shiite, as blasphemers and therefore not worthy of engaging in Egyptian politics.

● (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I certainly appreciate your being here. I want to tag on to what you're talking about in regard to women in particular.

We've heard some disturbing reports about violent sexual assaults against female protestors in Egypt. Do you have any information on this that you could share with us?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes. It's a very touching and touchy subject for me.

Tahrir Square has now become a place that is very unwelcoming to women protestors. I've heard this over and over again from human rights defenders. I actually spent most of 2011 in a tent in the square. I was one of those people who said that women needed to be there, even if it meant giving up a little time off work, because of the importance of having both genders engaging in this...and the lack of ability for us due to some community or societal restraints.

Now it has become a very ugly space. You have violence against women, including—and I apologize for the descriptor—vaginal penetration of women using knives, and the abduction of women. You have gangs pulling women aside saying “We'll protect you, we'll protect you, we'll protect you”, and then stuffing them into trunks. When I was in Tahrir late last year, I personally saw a group around a woman, who was then flung onto my tent. The tent collapsed and then the crowd trampled her and everyone else nearby, including trampling one of my friends.

The escalation from harassment to rape is quite alarming—and for almost all activists. It has now become a tool of political terrorism to stop women from engaging in these public spaces, and to limit the opposition, which includes a very strong base in the feminist community and women's activist groups, from engaging in politics. This has become really problematic, and the use of violence against us has created an environment where it has become very difficult for me, for example, to walk down from my work, which is three blocks from Tahrir, and cross the street to go to a friend's house, which is on the other side of Tahrir.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, thank you for that.

I know it's very personal for you, I can see that in your commentary.

Is any minority group of religious women more affected or targeted than others, or is it general in nature? Is it just towards the activist groups?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I think it's towards the opposition and those who are in the street. If you remember—I actually think it was at the beginning of 2012—there was the infamous blue bra girl incident, where a girl was dragged across the square. She was a muhajaba, so she was a Muslim and outwardly expressing her religiosity.

They have targeted secular Muslims, and they have targeted Christians. There have been a couple of incidents where teachers have cut unveiled women's hair. So there has been some sectarian twist to it, but these women were not necessarily Christian. In fact, secular Muslims are more likely to be targeted for showing their hair or not adhering to the orthodoxy of the Muslim faith than Christians. I remember during the Maspero incident, and this was not necessarily to do with women, where we were asked if we were Muslim or Christian.

It seems to be that where the anger is going, the community sort of flows with it. Right now, the anger is targeting women, and it doesn't seem to have a very sectarian twist to it. But it is one of the ways they're limiting engagement, whether you're talking about the Christian community or the feminist community, in the revolution.

● (1335)

Mr. Wayne Marston: How's my time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have another minute and a half.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Okay.

One of the things that's of interest to me is the performance of Egyptian security, or the Egyptian police, and public prosecutors when they're investigating these attacks, particularly the ones against women. Is the treatment comparable to that if a male were attacked?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: The cases of attacks against women are very difficult. There's very little rule of law right now. Unless there's a specific interest in the case, there's very little follow-up on the attacks on protestors, and specifically on women. But some of the escalation of the issues around women seems to have some pull with the public prosecutor. As we bring these issues up in the international community, it seems to push the Egyptian government to take some actions. You saw this with the virginity tests in March 2011, with a court case that stopped...and then afterwards it was called to a stop in all military investigations, or all military interactions with citizens. So there are spaces where you find that there can be improvement. But no, I don't think there's any difference between attacks against women and the public prosecutor.

And the issue with attacks against women specifically is that rape cases, whether we're talking about the U.S., Canada, or anywhere in the world, are very difficult to prosecute because of the "he said, she said" nature of these attacks and, more importantly in Egypt, because of how sensitive the issue is. Some of these girls do not want to be persecuted within the context of the court system; therefore, they're not necessarily willing to come forward within the context of the legal system.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's been an international problem for many generations.

I think that probably takes up my time.

The Chair: It does, yes.

We go next to Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

And thank you, Ms. Sherif, for your time and your presentation.

Egypt is expected to hold legislative elections beginning in April. To your knowledge are there any Coptic Christians or other religious minorities running for office? Is it possible for religious minorities to run for office?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes, Coptic Christians are free to run for office. The issue with some of the party lists, and it's the same issue with women, is that the domination at the top of the lists is generally Muslim and male; therefore, it's very unlikely that someone will be voted in. In the last Parliament, there were 10 women and Christians who were elected, who are in Parliament. I think some of them were even appointed. Some of them were both women and Christians, therefore filling both slots at the same time. So no, there are a lot of electoral issues around elections and the Christian community.

As for your question on whether I know who's running, there haven't been announcements of nominations yet, so I'm not sure who's running.

I'd like to also note that the churches all withdrew from the last constitutional assembly, and the opposition now has said that it will boycott the election, so we're waiting to see if the Coptic community and the Christian community will also follow suit.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Could you please tell our committee what exactly foreign development agencies in Egypt are doing to help the Coptic Christians in that area? Have they been successful in making some sort of dialogue with the religious extremist groups?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I know that the focus of the session is on the Coptic community, but at the current time I think it's less an issue within the context of the Coptic community and more an issue of the Islamists—whether extremists or those who are just supporting political Islam—and the secularist Muslims, including some of the Christians and some of the other opposition. I think the current polarization makes it very difficult for any organization to really function within the concept of any kind of anti-sectarian or interfaith dialogue.

I remember—and I'm going to use a personal anecdote—having conversations in 2011 with Salafi protestors in Tahrir about how we can work together, and that seems to have fallen apart. They are no longer engaged in some of the same organizing work that some of the other opposition are, and there seems to be a divide, a chasm, building between them.

Speaking of international organizations, one of the issues that I will take this opportunity to bring up is the NGO law. The current formation or draft law presented in the Shura Council will make it very difficult for almost any international organization to function in Egypt. Actually, most domestic organizations will also have a very difficult time functioning.

International funding will have to go through the government. Registration of international NGOs, rather than notification, will become the law. Even for domestic NGOs, all their funding will become nationalized and their employees will fall within the context of the Egyptian government's authority, making them no longer NGOs but just government organizations that provide charity and development.

The activities of international NGOs will have to be approved by the government, which is going to be particularly problematic for those dealing with sectarian issues, especially if we have one of the parties in power. I call on the House of Commons to urge the Egyptian government to retract the FJP NGO law and for it to look at a more progressive law. This may have some serious implications, both for my organization and other organizations.

● (1340)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Ms. Sherif, could you please explain to the committee the political dynamics behind the constitutional drafting crisis in late 2012? To your knowledge will the new constitution continue to discriminate against the Coptic Christians and other religious minorities in Egypt? Also, can you please explain why some suggest that sharia law in Egypt's constitution will continue to create tension between religious groups?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Could you do that in one minute, please.

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I will try, but that's a rather long question.

Yes, there are some issues with religious minorities in the new constitution. But as I stated in my opening statement, this constitution offers a little more protection for Christians and Jews than the previous one. The issue around sharia law is the interpretation of law based around sharia jurisprudence. Fortunately—and I'm not an expert on sharia jurisprudence—there are some protections offered for the Christian community, even outside this specific article. I think you're talking about article 221 in particular.

The other article that will be problematic is article 10, because the protection of morality doesn't necessarily mean the protection of morality within the context of all three Abrahamic religions. It doesn't specify that this protection of morality can have an adverse effect on religious minorities.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): I appreciate that, thank you.

We'll now move to Mr. McKay of the Liberal Party.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you again for speaking to us Ms. Sherif.

Is there a hierarchy of persecution, in other words from the least oppressed to most oppressed, either between secular and religious groups or within the religious groups...?

● (1345)

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I think that those who practise the Abrahamic faiths within the religious context would receive the most protection, both because they're afforded protections under sharia and the constitution. The constitution and the Egyptian government do not recognize an atheist, someone who denounces their religion, or any other non-Abrahamic religions. There has been persecution of the Shiite community, as I said in my opening statement.

While there is sectarian violence against the Christian community by certain segments of the Salafi community and those who profess or adhere to the more extremist tendencies within the Salafi community, I think it's important to note that within that hierarchy in government protection, more protection is afforded to the Christian community than for some other communities.

Women, I would say, are also one of the groups that are constantly under attack. If we're looking at a hierarchy of oppression, I would probably say that some of the rural communities are afforded the least protection. That's because there's the least amount of outreach of law and order within these communities and they're more traditional in solving these problems. That's where you'll find most of the issues with the Coptic community.

Hon. John McKay: There is, if you will, almost a religious hierarchy here. They put the Shiites in with atheists and Bahá'i as, in effect, blasphemers?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes, some do. Even though the Al-Azhar does provide them the right to exist and does recognize them, a lot of the Egyptians and the majority of the Sunni community do not recognize the Twelvers Shia community.

Hon. John McKay: I don't know this, but I'm assuming that as secular Muslim, you would have greater protection than, say, Christians or Jews in Egypt.

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: No. I'm a woman and therefore choose not to cover my hair. I don't have the protection of being from a different faith. I'm not currently expected to do anything, but I could be expected to cover my hair. There's a difference between violations by the state or impunity from violations by non-state entities. From non-state entities, I feel under just as much duress as everyone else, and I think that goes across the board. I'm given some leeway, for example, by conservative Muslims when I'm walking in the street because they just assume that I'm a Christian. That will give you a lead into that.

Hon. John McKay: There's a bit of an irony there.

My second question has to do with the personal safety of foreigners. What are your observations regarding foreigners who choose to go to Egypt for whatever reason, be it business, tourism, or whatever?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Other than their being targeted at certain points...and what I mean by that is the targeting of reporters in Tahrir, where they're in a very volatile situation.... The same, I have to say, is true of anyone who looks foreign. Even though I'm Egyptian, because of my demeanour and having grown up and been abroad most of my life, everyone just assumes, until I start speaking in Arabic, that I'm a foreigner and would treat me thus.

Foreigners do have some issues, but walking around outside these flash zones, I think, is pretty safe. There have been cases of abduction in the Sinai, but this isn't new; these incidents have happened throughout the last two decades, but have returned. This is more an issue of a Bedouin-to-state negotiations than specific attacks on foreigners.

Other than the cases of rape that happened in Tahrir, outside the context of those very volatile areas, there haven't been too many attacks on foreigners.

Hon. John McKay: That was the final question.

● (1350)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): That was the final question.

Hon. John McKay: Thanks very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Mr. Schellenberger, please.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Reid, for your intervention today. It was great.

When you get to this point in the questioning, a lot of the most prevalent questions have been asked already. So if my comments do overlap with some of those questions, please excuse me.

Both Sunni and Shiites are Muslims. What is the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I'm not a religious expert. It's an historical difference, starting practically with the line of descendants of the Caliphate, with Ali being the one who was supposed to take over or follow the Prophet in heading the Muslim community. This was the initial conflict or break. That's a very historical question. The main difference, in practical terms, is prayer. There's a slightly different manner of prayer, and there are adherents to certain rules and regulations, and specifically jurisprudence.

To me, as a secular person, no I don't see a difference. There are four different sets of jurisprudence within Islam, and I don't really understand why there's such strife. It's more of a political power play than it is a religious question.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Are the Shiites looked at in the same way as the Coptic Christians in Egypt?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: No. The Shiite community is viewed by a wide swath of the Sunni community as just another sect within Islam. In Egypt in particular, and in some other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—and this is an aspect of the conflict in Bahrain—they're viewed a being slightly outside the context and as non-believers. They are therefore worse than the Christian community, because all sects and all jurisprudence accept the Christian community and their own practices. It's within sharia law that they have to accept them.

Shiites are accepted by Al-Azhar and the formal Islamic community, but some sects like the Wahhabi sect and some of the more extremist communities like the Salafi community do not accept Shiites at all as being believers and, therefore, believe that they fall outside the protection of the Abrahamic faiths.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: In your talk, you mentioned at different times that “they” have done this or that. Who are “they”? Are “they” the government, or a particular group of people?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: You would have to point out where I say “they”. If I'm talking within this context, in saying “they” I would refer probably either to extremists, or it could be the government. I don't know which "they" you're asking about.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I can accept that. I can't remember which “they” it was, either.

Are you aware of any attacks on Coptic Christians and Coptic places of worship in Egypt since August 2012?

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Yes. I actually mentioned one that happened last year. Also, there's a case of an attack in Dahshur, which started as a fight between a Copt and a Muslim and the latter was killed. The violence escalated until the Christians evacuated the village. Again, the Egyptian government, instead of applying the penal code for the violence, whether against the Copt or the Muslim, decided to go with an informal reconciliation. You seek the two heads of the two communities and sit down to discuss what that looks like.

There was also the incident of the Shoubra el-Kheima last November 5, when Muslims came to stop the reconstruction of the church there, and they were carrying firearms. Rather than upholding the penal code, again, the governor decided on having a reconciliatory process, which is of course much more informal and does not really support the upholding of the rule of law in Egypt.

● (1355)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you for that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

Now we'll go to Monsieur Jacob.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Sherif, thank you for appearing before the committee.

First, I'd like to know who the major groups and forces are within Egyptian society and political life that incite hatred towards Christians or other religious minorities.

[*English*]

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I think that there are some Salafi clerics who have used incitement against Christians to build a base. I would point at them particularly. But this is a segment of the community. Those who have engaged in a political discourse, while at the beginning used some sectarian incitement, I think have moved away from it slightly, while their base continues to raise the tenor of violence against religious minorities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

Second, I'd like to know how Canada could most effectively promote human rights during Egypt's democratic transition.

[*English*]

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: One is impunity. In court cases a measure of the successful prosecution of those who commit violence, whether it's sectarian violence or any form of violence, would be the reform of the judiciary. More importantly, in the case of law and order, would be the reform of the Ministry of Interior. I would say that those would be significant measures that the Canadian government could push for and use to measure positive steps toward democracy.

If we're looking at the number of cases of defamation—and I'm not just talking about defamation of religion, but defamation against the president—the number of reporters arrested, the number of channels closed, and the attacks, including personal attacks, against the opposition, I think those would be negative measures, a lack of freedom and a lack of.... Some of the laws that are being put forth in the Shura Council, for example, the protest law and the NGO law, are negative measures, a step away from democracy by this government.

● (1400)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: I have another question.

What specific things could Canada do to improve respect for the human rights of Coptic Christians in Egypt?

[*English*]

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: More importantly, the first step—although it sounds very small, but I think is the most important step—is to push for the proper adherence to the rule of law. Under this current constitution, if the rule of law were adhered to, it would be a step in a positive direction and would give the Christian minority recourse when crimes were committed against it. Most of these cases, including the Alber case, could be prosecuted and justice for the Christian community would be the same justice, and equality under the law would be the same equality, as it is for all communities. That would be the best protection for the Christian community.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

Do I have any time left?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): One minute.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: One minute? Okay.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to know what not to do, in other words, what measures or actions would be less effective in tackling that violence and lack of respect for human rights.

[*English*]

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: I would suggest not using a sectarian frame. I would actually frame it within the context of transparency and good governance and democracy. I think once we get into a sectarian frame it falls on deaf ears. The sectarian violence is not something to be scoffed at, but I think talking about it within the context of greater human rights would be the most effective way of doing this.

So I would avoid the sectarian frame, even though I do admit it and include it within any context—protection of minorities, religion, women, and all these issues. Talk about transparency, accountability, and rule of law.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): That was quite amazing. We had two seconds left of our time when you wrapped up.

I just want to say on behalf of the committee how much we appreciate your testimony. It's very important to us to have an on-the-ground sense of what's happening there. I want to end by thanking you and wishing you well. And keep safe.

Ms. Nadine Sherif Abdel Wahab: Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): This meeting is now adjourned.

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