



Human Rights in EU External Relations with the Middle East: where do minority rights fit in?

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Introduction

The EU aspires to construct a global role for itself as a promoter of normative values and supporting human rights is one the most clearly established objectives in EU external relations. However, the effectiveness and appropriateness of the EU's role in promoting such norms, as well as the tools it uses to promote its agenda, are disputed. Devising an appropriate human rights agenda in EU external relations is made more complex but perhaps more vital in regions of instability or conflict. In the shifting context of the post-Arab spring Middle East, the EU has had to adapt its speech, policies and priorities toward the region. The Arab uprisings have increased awareness of the violence that is repeatedly targeted towards individuals and communities apparently as a result of their religious identity. Consequently it has become increasingly crucial for the EU to address where the rights of such targeted groups fit in the EU's policy making in the area of human rights promotion in

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the region. Therefore while this paper will briefly touch upon the questions facing EU human rights policy making as well as the status of human rights in EU-Middle East relations, its main aim is to consider EU speech and policies on the rights of Middle Eastern Christian populations using the case of Egyptian Christians, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church and are indigenous to Egypt.¹

There has clearly been disagreement on how to proceed. In January 2011, Italy blocked an EU religious persecution text because it failed to mention attacks on Christians. France supported Italy and called for the need to include references to specific minorities, including Christians and Shi'ite Muslims. Later, in October 2011, the European Parliament did specifically mention Christians in Egypt and Syria in a plenary session and adopted a resolution calling on Egyptian and Syrian authorities to protect Christians from attacks.² Yet when more than 80 churches, Coptic property and Copts themselves were attacked after the dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in July 2013, some Copts perceived the EU as being deliberately slow in its condemnation of the violence targeted against them. According to Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, Copts perceive that the EU acts on particular incidents but that it does not have a policy, which only creates ambiguity and confusion.³

While perceptions of inconsistency and even hypocrisy are clearly an issue in terms of the effectiveness of EU external relations, this is not the focus of this paper because significant scholarship already exists on this issue.⁴ Rather it will discuss the way the EU formulates its policy in cases of violence or discrimination against persons or property belonging to a specific religious identity. I argue first that religious persecution must be acknowledged as inseparable from human rights violations and not as a separate set of rights,

¹ The author acknowledges that it is not only Christian groups that face religiously motivated violence or discrimination. The killing of four Shia Muslims in Egypt in June 2013, and region-wide discrimination against Baha'is are clear, but not the only, examples. Due to limitations of space, this paper will focus on one case study to examine the EU's speech on 'minority rights' and the Middle East, which is the Coptic Orthodox Christians of Egypt.

² European Parliament Press Release, "Parliament stands up for Christians in Egypt and Syria", 27 October 2011, online <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20111027IPR30446/html/Parliament-stands-up-for-Christians-in-Egypt-and-Syria>.

³ Author interview with Bishop Angaelos, head of the Coptic Church of Great Britain, December 2013.

⁴ George Christou, 2010, "European Union security logics to the east: the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership", *European Security*, 19:3, 413-430; Rosa Balfour, 2012, *Human Rights and Democracy in EU Foreign Policy: the cases of Ukraine and Egypt*, London: Routledge 2012; Andrew Williams, 2004, *EU Human Rights Policies: a study in irony*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Karen Smith, 2008, *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (2nd Ed), Cambridge: Polity Press; Marika Lerch and Guido Schwellnus, 2006, "Normative by nature? The role of coherence in justifying the EU's external human rights policy", *Journal of European Public Policy* [Volume 13, Issue 2](#).

but I also suggest that the EU needs to urgently consider how it intends to approach the rights of marginalised or targeted sections of the populations in Middle Eastern countries experiencing social, political and economic upheaval. The formation of the EU's approach to inclusion of marginalised or persecuted groups has developed in the context of the 'national minorities' concept with the purpose of establishing standards for countries seeking accession to the EU and resolving conflict, such as in the former Yugoslavia. This is a quite a different context from the case study of this paper. The word Copt is a corruption of the Greek name for Egypt but Copt has come to mean those Egyptians who did not convert to Islam after the Arab invasion of the seventh century. Therefore, Copts are not ethnically or linguistically separate from Muslim Egyptians, nor are they concentrated in certain areas of Egypt's territory. There are no Coptic aspirations for autonomy or for the institution of 'minority rights' and in fact, most Copts reject the use of the term minority as disenfranchising them from their nation.

Therefore, I contend that the use of term 'minority rights' as a framework for addressing violence against Christians in Egypt is counter-productive. It does not promote an inclusive or universal human rights discourse and is even rejected by Copts, including the Church leadership.⁵ Promoting the EU's role and human rights values in Egypt is therefore a two-fold challenge: First, if human rights values are to continue to form part of EU external relations, the first challenge is to establish a human rights agenda that is not seen as dismissible and thus leading to a gap in credibility and influence. Second, the human rights agenda should include religious equality as a core element but without addressing marginalised, persecuted or numerically minority religious groups with the language and policy framework developed for national minorities. Consequently, I conclude that a discourse centred on the protection and equality of all individuals, not as members of any particular category whether it is gender-based or faith-based or ethnic-based, is a more effective approach. Approaching inclusion and equality for all regardless of religious identification as integral and inseparable values-neither separate nor side-lined- in the EU's approach to human rights and democracy could help repair the EU's credibility, which is crucial to (re)establishing its influence in the Middle East.

Human Rights and EU policy

As scholars of EU foreign policy note, the EU has established a public commitment to the pursuit of democracy and human rights, not only within the Union but also in its external relations.⁶ Particularly since the fall of the Berlin

⁵ Author interview, Bishop Angaelos, December 2013; Elizabeth Iskander, 2012a, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt: Coptic media, identity and representation*, London: Routledge, p.105.

⁶ For example Jan Erik Wetzel (ed), 2011, *The EU as a "Global Player" in Human Rights?* London, New York: Routledge; Smith, *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World*.

wall that dramatically altered internal European relations and strategies of international diplomacy, the EU has sought to bolster its weight as a global player through establishing a set of 'EU values' and an ethical foreign policy.⁷ Consequently human rights and democracy have become an integral part of EU foreign policy and are enshrined in EU treaties and agreements. This has been a gradual process that was not evident in the original Treaty of Rome that established the EEC in 1957. This can be contrasted with the framework of rights contained in the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, which Wetzel argues demonstrates a "redefinition of the previously market-centred unions as a 'Union of Values'".⁸

The EU has developed this by introducing human rights clauses into accession agreements and external trade agreements. It has also established a system of human rights dialogues, a European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and a practice of demarches, which are statements issued to put pressure on foreign governments. This growing emphasis built on the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, in which article 177 (2) made respect for human rights an official policy objective. As a result, "human rights matters were not seen as separable from other interests. They were linked demonstrably to issues of political concern to the community".⁹ Yet as Balfour¹⁰ indicates, there is a "gap between rhetoric and performance, between how the EU sees itself and how it is seen by others." Furthermore, uncertainties remain over the EU's ability or right to export human rights and democracy. Indeed, as Williams¹¹ points out, the EU's approach to human rights and democracy promotion has left it vulnerable to accusations of neo-colonialism and the exploitation of a rights discourse as a mechanism to justify EU power and bolster its control on the world stage. This can lead to perceptions of the EU's inclusion of its values in agreements and actions taken to enforce them as patronising or even as a continuation of colonialist patterns.¹² Considering that the Middle East has a significant experience of European colonisation, the potential preponderance of such perceptions is particularly problematic in EU relations with states in this region.

Rights and EU-Egypt Relations

Egypt represents a key ally for European countries in the Middle East, occupying a strategic position both territorially and politically. Egypt is situated in the EU's southern neighbourhood and has therefore been a part of the EU's initiatives to organise its relations with Mediterranean countries as a bloc. In

⁷ Karen Smith and Margot Light (eds), 2001, *Ethics and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Wetzel, *The EU as a "Global Player" in Human Rights?*, p.9.

⁹ Williams, *EU Human Rights Policies*, p.34.

¹⁰ Balfour, *Human Rights and Democracy in EU Foreign Policy*, p.1-2.

¹¹ Williams, *EU Human Rights Policies*.

¹² Wetzel, *The EU as a "Global Player" in Human Rights?*, p.12.

October 1972, the EEC first presented a Global Mediterranean Policy (GMP) at the Paris summit and, building on this, signed an agreement with Egypt in 1977.¹³ The next step in developing this partnership was spurred on by the tumult of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reshaping of the European map. In reaction, the EC looked again at the GMP and proposed a Redirected Mediterranean Policy (RMP) in 1989. However, it remained, like the GMP, largely focused on economic issues.¹⁴

This began to change in the 1990s as the EU launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)- also known as the Barcelona Process- in 1995, which encompassed a much broader scope than the earlier frameworks. A few years later, this was followed by a another revamping of the EMP to create the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) introduced in 2004, in which human rights and democracy were established as core values in the EU's external relations.¹⁵ The ENP was further complemented by a series of Association Agreements (AA), the EU signing one with Egypt in 2001 that eventually came into force in 2004. Egypt's AA was among the last to be negotiated and according to Balfour, it was the human rights clause that was one of the reasons behind this delay. She indicates that there was public resistance to the clause, which was viewed as interference in Egypt's domestic affairs and it was only after an Egyptian media campaign that argued the clause would be unimportant on the basis that the EU would not employ this mechanism that the agreement went ahead.¹⁶

Despite such resistance, and also dismissiveness, in relation to the EU's insistence on human rights clauses, the EU has continued to pursue the same language and tactics. In the EU's Egypt Country Strategy Paper for 2007-2013 it states that assistance will be "targeted at strengthening the culture of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the capacity and effectiveness of all competent institutions".¹⁷ In the section of the report entitled 'National Indicative Programme' it lists the EU's priorities. The first priority is supporting Egypt's reforms in the areas of democracy, human rights and justice. Particular issues of concern mentioned are the use of torture, poor prison conditions, corruption and gender-based discrimination and particular attention is proposed to be paid to the enforcement of protocols and international conventions related to human rights, to which Egypt is party. While certain areas of rights are specified, including racial and gender-based discrimination, discrimination based on religion is not, even though Egypt is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which

¹³ Shaista Shaheen Zafar, 2011, "Contemporary EU-Egypt Relations within the Parameters of the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Programme and ENP" *Journal of European Studies*, p.99.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.101-2.

¹⁵ Joel Peters (ed), 2012, *The European Union and the Arab Spring: promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East*, Lanham, Maryland; Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, p.1-2.

¹⁶ Balfour, *Human Rights and Democracy in EU Foreign Policy* p.37

¹⁷ Egypt Country Strategy Programme (2007-2013) and National Indicative Programme (2007-2010), online <http://www.enpi-info.eu/library/content/egypt-country-strategy-paper-2007-2013-and-national-indicative-programme-2007-2010>, p.22.

guarantees freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion. The issue of religious freedom is conspicuous in this country strategy by its absence in the list of rights and freedoms that the EU intends to focus on as part of its top priority of supporting human rights, democracy and justice in Egypt. This indicates some omissions in the EU's human rights approach. Another criticism is the vagueness of the EU's strategy for, or ability to, enhance its human rights priority in Egypt.¹⁸ Even the series of revisions of the framework of relations with Mediterranean partners, including Egypt, appears to have offered little in the way of realised human rights objectives. This perhaps explains both why the EU's reaction to the Arab uprisings was to announce the intention to revise the ENP again, and also the clear scepticism from the region regarding the effectiveness of any revision.¹⁹

As Egyptian analyst Moataz el-Fegeiry argues, the EU's tools are weak and the EU has come under pressure from Egypt "to moderate the human rights language used by Europe in the closing statements issued after meetings of bilateral partnership councils".²⁰ Zafar also notes that there is a reluctance to apply negative conditionalities,²¹ partly because they do not always square with EU interests and partly because there is not even a complete consensus within the EU about if or how human rights should be promoted as part of foreign policy.²² This leads to a sense of hypocrisy and double standards that only weakens the EU and the credibility of its union of values image. This has been reflected in perceptions of the EU's stance on the Arab uprisings. According to Balfour "EU policy before and after the revolutions, and its response to them, was overall seen as poor, and its image had been tarnished as a result".²³ Despite the EU being a major donor to Egypt, the EU has tended to take a backseat to the US in the region²⁴ and this was noticeable during and after the uprising.²⁵ Ishak Ibrahim, a human rights activist, also indicates that the EU's perceived inconsistency and lack of serious position on human rights or of putting pressure on governments to fulfil their obligations to protect all citizens has contributed to the weakened image of the EU. He suggests that EU public statements are often seen as

¹⁸ Balfour, *Human Rights and Democracy in EU Foreign Policy*, p.36.

¹⁹ Sally Khalifa Isaac, May 2012, *Europe and the Arab Revolutions From a Weak to a Proactive Response to a Changing Neighborhood*, KFG working paper No. 39, p.8.

²⁰ Moataz El Fegeiry, September 2010, *Human rights and the European Neighbourhood Policy Europe Retreats, Southern Mediterranean States Hostile to Human Rights in the Ascendant*, FRIDE working paper, p.4.

²¹ Zafar, *Contemporary EU-Egypt Relations*, p.117.

²² Balfour, *Human Rights and Democracy in EU Foreign Policy*, p.5.

²³ Ibid. p. 4.

²⁴ Zafar, *Contemporary EU-Egypt Relations*, p.114.

²⁵ Timo Behr (ed), 2011, *Hard Choices: the EU's options in a Changing Middle East*, FIIA report 28; J. Peters (ed), 2012, *The European Union and the Arab Spring: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East*, Lexington Books: New York.

ineffective, dismissible and even counter-productive because they are not matched by action on the ground.²⁶

It appears then, that despite the EU's involvement in the region and, at least partly, due to the perceived weakness of its human rights agenda, perceptions of the EU in the region are not in harmony with the EU's perceptions of itself. In fact, according to Coptic activist Kamal Ghobrial the general perception held by Copts of the EU is that its speech on human rights does not extend beyond statements about violations without taking any serious steps.²⁷ How the EU is to create a human rights agenda that works to bolster its role rather than to undermine its credibility is not the main focus of this paper however. Instead this paper seeks to take the specific question of the applicability of the EU's national minority rights experience to the issue of religiously motivated violence and discrimination. The remainder of this paper will therefore consist of a consideration of religious rights as an element of human rights that appears to have been neglected or treated inconsistently in the case of EU relations with Egypt, and particularly how the EU's speech and history of policy making on minority rights could or should shape EU policy and reaction to attacks on Christians in Egypt.

The Development of Minority rights in the EU

Despite the EU's inconsistent reactions regarding religious discrimination and particularly violence against Christians and other religious groups in the Middle East, the EU is not a stranger to addressing the challenges of promoting the inclusion of communities excluded or discriminated against on the basis of identity. However, the EU's experience has been largely focused on questions of what are termed national minorities. The two main challenges faced by the EU related to this are the inclusion of ethnic or linguistic national minorities in states seeking accession to the EU and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.²⁸ In parallel to the EU's adoption of human rights and democracy as union values since the 1990s, the protection and inclusion of national minorities was also developed as a concern. A significant step was the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 at a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Charter affirmed "that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve, and develop that identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law."

²⁶ Author interview with Ishak Ibrahim, researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, November 2013.

²⁷ Author interview with Kamal Ghobrial, a Coptic thinker, November 2013.

²⁸ Williams, *EU Human Rights Policies*, p.69.

Following quickly on from this was a meeting of the OSCE in Geneva in which the link between regional stability and national minorities was underlined²⁹ but it was the conflict in Yugoslavia that pushed the EU to establish a high commissioner for national minorities in 1992. Due to the context in which this was established the role was developed as a conflict prevention position rather than one promoting a rights-based agenda and the focus or objective of EU policy making on the issue became dominated primarily by security concerns.³⁰ This also hints at the development of policies and concepts of minority rights that tended to be addressed separately from human rights in a way linked strongly with conflict within Europe. Krzysztof Drzewicki points to the treatment of minority rights at the Copenhagen Council of 2002 as though there was an attempt to put "it on an equal footing with human rights", which hints at this separate approach.³¹

Like many complex concepts, the lack of a single and clear definition leads to difficulties in crafting policy responses. One of the main proponents of the concept of national minority rights is Will Kymlicka.³² He himself has pointed out gaps in the EU's understanding of national minorities for example regarding whether they have rights of self-rule or territorial autonomy.³³ But it is not only the EU with gaps in its policy making, he notes that "various international organisations have struggled with this issue for the past 15 years without any clear resolution and their policies and practices remain full of ambiguities and inconsistencies".³⁴ There is also criticism of Kymlicka's model of national minorities for focusing on ethnic identity at the expense of other forms of identity. This leads to the lack of tools available to thinking about religious identity and belonging. Also Europe's particular experience inevitably shapes policy responses. Williams argues that within Europe it is the Roma that came to symbolise the question of minority rights.³⁵ Alongside this experience was the conflict in the Balkans. For example in Macedonia there was direct intervention to guarantee a "heavily engineered degree of power sharing" for the Albanian minority.³⁶ Stemming from this experience, policy focus on national minorities and on ethnic or territorial issues leading to national conflict or secessionist movements could lead to a blurring of

²⁹ David Galbreath and Joanne McEvoy, 2011, *The European Minority Rights Regime*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.71.

³⁰ Ibid. p.72.

³¹ Ibid. p.82.

³² Will Kymlicka, 1996, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon.

³³ Galbreath and McEvoy, *The European Minority Rights Regime*, p.94.

³⁴ Will Kymlicka, 2007, "The Internationalization of Minority Rights", *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, p.1.

³⁵ Williams, *EU Human Rights Policies*, P.70.

³⁶ Richard Youngs, 2005, *10 years of the Barcelona Process a Model for Arab Reform*, Fride working paper, p.425.

understanding and policy making if applying previous EU experience to the Middle East and particularly to the issues facing different religious communities in the region.

In fact, the examination of the Coptic case will question the very value of applying the concept of (national) minority rights to Egyptian Christians and other indigenous religious identity groups in the region. The term minority, as it has been understood and approached in international law and EU policy making, implies a form of 'othering' that cannot only be detrimental to the very communities identified for protection but can also actually be rejected by them as an unwanted label. The following examination will indicate that while recognition of cases where exclusion or discrimination occurs towards an indigenous group based on their religious identity is necessary, it must also be acknowledged that the group may not be seeking recognition of a different culture or in fact be seeking any special protection on the basis of their identity but are rather aiming to be considered an equal citizen deserving of inclusion and protection on the basis of their being a citizen rather than the member of an identity-based group. In this case, a different discursive framework is needed for formulating policies so that different religious identities are acknowledged without invoking unwanted notions of 'minority-ness' or 'otherness'

The Problem with Minority Rights: The Case of Coptic Christians

Middle East historian, Benjamin White, has identified that a minority discourse entered the Syrian public space via a body of international law on minority issues rather than emerging from local concerns.³⁷ Similarly many Copts see the term minority as a label applied to them by external actors rather than reflecting the local context with this making 'minorityness' the decisive factor for Coptic identity before being Egyptian.³⁸ This can impose an unwanted label of difference and separation,³⁹ which is something clearly and repeatedly rejected by Egyptians who maintain a strong discourse of national unity between Muslim and Christian. This national unity narrative goes back to 1919 when Egyptians united to resist the British mandate. The narrative remains strong in popular consciousness today and is also linked to concerns

³⁷ Benjamin Thomas White, 2013, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: the politics of community in French Mandate Syria*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

³⁸ Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*.

³⁹ C. Fried (ed.), 1983, *Minorities: Community and Identity*, Dahlem Konferenzen, Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

about external forces dividing and conquering Egyptians for their own interests.⁴⁰

Copts were an integral and influential part of the politics of the 1919 resistance period, especially in the *Wafd* political party that dominated the Egyptian political scene for the first half of the twentieth century.⁴¹ So strong was their influence in politics and media⁴² that Copts refused British efforts to include provisions during the independence negotiations for a role in protecting the Copts. Similarly when negotiating the 1922 constitution, the Copts who held key roles in the drafting process refused to include provisions for a Christian quota in parliament arguing that drawing a line of difference between Muslim and Christian was artificial and counter-productive. The development of Egypt's national unity discourse constructs this attempt to divide Egyptians into Muslim and Christian as essentially un-Egyptian.⁴³ This is not to say that there is no problem of violence targeted at Copts but to understand these tensions in this particular context clarifies the extent to which external actors addressing them with the language of minority rights is problematic.

The controversy surrounding the application of the term minority to Christians in Egypt became a national issue when Egyptian activist Saad Eddine Ibrahim organized a conference in 1994. The conference entitled 'Minorities in the Arab world' included the Coptic case on the conference agenda leading to a national outcry.⁴⁴ Both the state and the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, then Pope Shenouda III, rejected the minority label.⁴⁵ The conference was eventually moved to Cyprus. Muslim and Christian writers and thinkers, clergy have reiterated ever since that the Copts are not a minority.⁴⁶ This has engendered its own problems though.⁴⁷ While Coptic activist Kamal Ghobrial argues that those who see universal human rights as a vehicle for foreign interference are those who are not genuinely concerned about human rights in Egypt, there is broad fear of the minority label and the potential interference of external actors through this issue as indicated by human rights activist Ishak

⁴⁰ Peter Makari, 2007, *Conflict & Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt*, New York: Syracuse University Press; Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*.

⁴¹ B. L. Carter, 1986, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, London: Croom Helm.

⁴² Ramy Atta, 2007, *Thakirat al-Aqbat fi al-Sahafa al-Misriya*, Cairo: Maktabat Osqofiya li Shabab.

⁴³ Elizabeth Iskander, 2012, "The 'Mediation' of Muslim-Coptic Relations: the strategies and discourses of the official Egyptian press during Mubarak's presidency, *The Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Volume 21 Issue 1, pp.31-44.

⁴⁴ G. Zayda, 2007, Nūbiyyīn wa-Aqbat, *Al-Ahrām*, 11 July.

⁴⁵ Iskander, *The 'Mediation' of Muslim-Coptic Relations*, p.35.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ For example Mariz Tadros, March 2010, "The Sectarian Incident That Won't Go Away", *MERIP*, online <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero030510>; Also Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*.

Ibrahim.⁴⁸ As a result there has historically been a tendency to avoid addressing the existence of discriminatory attitudes in society and in state institutions. Consequently, in periods of instability Copts are vulnerable to attack due to untreated discriminatory attitudes, as has been repeatedly shown since the 2011 uprising. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated when over 80 churches were attacked and Copts and Coptic property were targeted after the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins were dispersed in August 2013 because Muslim Brotherhood supporters blamed Copts for supporting the removal of Morsi.⁴⁹

According to the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities of 1999, the suggestion is that minorities need special arrangements for inclusion, as well as education and linguistic rights. Again this is awkward in the case of an identity group such as Egyptian Christians because Copts do not, in general, seek special status. Clearly the EU experience of policy making for national minorities does not apply for the Copts who reject the term minority. At the most, some accept the term 'numerical minority'.⁵⁰ Because they do not see themselves as a national minority they do not seek protection from the 'majority' or from the state as an objective for Copts. Copts ask for protection from their own government according to their status as citizens. Therefore the EU should resist any inclination to address discrimination or violence against Copts in terms of minority politics⁵¹ because not only is this not in line with Coptic objectives, it is also an unacceptable framework which potentially weakens the objective of promoting values of equal citizenship and inclusion. If the EU were to pursue this language there would be continued resistance to the EU and a further erosion of EU credibility in Egyptian popular consciousness as a whole and not just among Copts.

Yet Copts do not reject the engagement of the EU with Coptic concerns when they are framed as part of broader Egyptian concerns. According to Ibrahim Habib, president of United Copts of Great Britain, when asked what the EU could or should do to safeguard Coptic rights his answer did not include any request for supporting Copts as a specific group. Instead he called on the EU to actively support democratic values and the promotion of literacy and educational programmes, gender equality and a secular state. He also called for the Muslim Brotherhood to be declared a terrorist organisation.⁵² In fact, many of the various European Coptic organisations have been active in lobbying the EU since the uprising and especially since the ousting of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 and espouse similar objectives. Rather than campaigning for Coptic rights these organisations particularly call for the EU to support Egypt's stance against the Muslim Brotherhood and militant

⁴⁸ Author interview with Kamal Ghobrial November 2013; Author interview with Ishak Ibrahim, November 2013.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Iskander Monier, 15 August 2013, No Cheek Left to Turn, *Asharq al-Awsat*, online <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/08/article55313685>.

⁵⁰ Author Interview with Bishop Angaelos, December 2013.

⁵¹ For example see Catherine Ashton's response to a parliamentary question, November 2013, online <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=E-2013-009966&language=SL>.

⁵² Author interview with Ibrahim Habib, head of United Copts of Great Britain, October 2013.

Islamists in general. In August 2013, Ashraf Ramelah, president of Voice of the Copts sent an open letter to Catherine Ashton in which he criticises her, and by extension the EU's attempt to intervene in the aftermath of the ousting of Morsi to secure his release and the Muslim Brotherhood's continuation in Egyptian politics.⁵³ In October 2013, Coptic activists from around Europe held a symposium at the European Parliament under the title "Is there a future for Copts". Again, rather than talking about rights for Copts or mechanisms to give Copts particular status within a power sharing or other political arrangement, the symposium focused its message on calling for the EU to support the drafting of new constitution and the road map introduced by the June 30th protests, recognition of the legitimacy of Morsi's ouster, and the request for the Muslim Brotherhood to be designated as a terrorist organisation.⁵⁴ United Copts GB issued a statement after the symposium with the following recommendations:

- 1- Encourage the separation of state from religion in Egypt by having secular constitution.
- 2- The rogue elements in society must feel the heavy weight of the law non-equivocally and across the board.
- 3- Encourage Egypt to empower women and treat them equally.
- 4- Support the new government in fighting terrorism.
- 5- Declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, help the government in drying out its recourses worldwide.⁵⁵

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Clearly a particular problem in terms of perceptions of EU policy among Copts and Egyptians in general has been the EU's stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁶ Many Copts and indeed Egyptians in general perceive double standards in EU speech defending the Muslim Brotherhood while Brotherhood supporters are accused of inciting hatred against Christians, which result in attacks on over 80 churches, the destruction of Coptic property and indeed the deaths of Christian citizens, specifically targeted for their faith.⁵⁷ Clear frustration among Europe-based Coptic groups, as evidenced by the appeals and statements made to the EU demonstrate this.

⁵³ [As of 27 October 2013 Ramelah informed the author he had received no response. The letter is available online at <http://www.voiceofthecopts.org/index.php/categories/op-eds/10632-an-open-letter-to-high-representative-catherine-ashton>; Interview with Kamal Ghobrial, November 2013.](http://www.voiceofthecopts.org/index.php/categories/op-eds/10632-an-open-letter-to-high-representative-catherine-ashton)

⁵⁴ YouTube User Esam Ebid, "EU CTV", uploaded 7 October 2013, online http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Q9M6B8Hlqb4.

⁵⁵ United Copts of Great Britain, 4 October 2013, "**European Union of Coptic Organisation for Human Right meet with the European Parliament members**", online http://www.unitedcopts.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8815&Itemid=83.

⁵⁶ AINA News, 11 May 2013, "Egyptian Christian Rights Groups Request EU Investigate Egypt", online <http://www.aina.org/news/20130510214520.pdf>; Nader Fawzi, 23 August 2013, "Letter to the European Parliament", online <http://www.copts-united.com/English/Details.php?I=927&A=11014>.

⁵⁷ See Mariz Tadros, 15 August 2013, "Egypt's Scorched Earth", *Open Democracy*, online <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mariz-tadros/egypt%E2%80%99s-scorched-earth>.

Ways Forward

In this case, the EU's self-representation as a normative power fails to resonate, a problem also identified in other cases.⁵⁸ Since Coptic objectives, as voiced by Coptic activists and church authorities, are not related to obtaining rights as a national minority, this suggests that a minority rights discourse would not be welcomed nor improve perceptions of the EU and its human rights agenda. Riggins, a scholar of minority studies, highlighted the dilemma that seeking solutions to promote inclusion and empowerment of a group that may be a minority or marginalised can have negative repercussions by entrenching difference and opening up separate spaces for persons based on their categorisation into minority or majority.⁵⁹ As well as establishing boundaries as a basis for social and/or political organisation, this can also reduce knowledge of the 'other'. From a social psychology point of view, social categorisation, categorising persons into distinct groups leads to "accentuating of the differences perceived between the members of different categories through the overestimation of the distances that separate and differentiate them".⁶⁰ The consequences are present in the case of Egyptian Christians, as illustrated by research on modern Coptic and Egyptian politics.⁶¹ To avoid the dilemma of beginning with the fact of difference, as the minority approach does, a holistic approach that integrates equal citizenship regardless of religion, gender, class and ethnicity should be adopted. This should be part of an organic process starting from the local context.

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One suggestion is taking a similar path to concept of *al-Mowatana*.⁶² This concept which carries the meaning of exercising active citizenship has been developed in Egypt since the 1980s but its real impact on the public sphere came when former president Hosni Mubarak adopted it via a constitutional amendment in 2006. This sparked a public discussion of the rights and duties of all Egyptian citizens and was promoted by a number of Coptic thinkers as a framework for equality and inclusion, not only of Copts but also of women and ethnic groups such as the Nubians. Since the uprising *al-Mowatana* has faded from public discourse for a variety of reasons, including its association with Mubarak.⁶³ However, it demonstrates that there is a foundation for a locally

⁵⁸ Williams, *EU Human Rights Policies*, p.117.

⁵⁹ Stephen Riggins, 1992, *Ethnic Minority Media*, London: Sage Publications.

⁶⁰ Gabriel Mugny and Juan Perez, 1991, *The Social Psychology of Minority Influence*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 39.

⁶¹ Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*; Elizabeth I. Monier, forthcoming, "The Arab Spring and Coptic–Muslim Relations: from Mubarak to the Muslim Brotherhood", *The European Yearbook of Minority Issues*; Mariz Tadros, 2013, *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

⁶² Monier, *The Arab Spring and Coptic–Muslim Relations*; Hany Labib, 2004, *al-Mowatana wa al-Owlama*, Cairo: Dar al-Shorooq; Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*.

⁶³ Monier, *The Arab Spring and Coptic–Muslim Relations*.

developed concept of equality and inclusion to take hold again, especially when promoted as a framework for achieving the democratic values apparently called for during the uprising.

Such a concept of active citizenship goes beyond the reliance on tolerance that Bishop Angaelos describes as inadequate to solving Egypt's tendency to be divided via religious identity. Going beyond tolerance to adopt a discourse of mutual acceptance focusing on active and inclusive citizenship could address issues of equality and justice without categorising citizens into majority and minority on the basis of denomination. This approach is cooperative and does not introduce competitiveness in terms of who defines rights, who implements them and for whom. For these reasons Bishop Angaelos calls for a proactive programme of social cohesion with funding going to people who will implement grass roots programmes for education and cohesion.⁶⁴ The EU already funds numerous projects to improve living conditions, environmental awareness and training opportunities⁶⁵ but attention should also be paid to programmes that educate children and young people about citizenship, including religious. Starting with inclusion rather than exclusion avoids 'othering' and a continuation of the tendency to separate citizens on the basis of religion and therefore could provide a stronger foundation for promoting human rights in Egypt than a 'minority rights' policy.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the difficulty in defining a human rights policy concerning the protection of Copts or other religious denominations in the Middle East. This dilemma should not lead to overlooking the problems faced by Copts or similar groups, however. To do so, weakens the credibility of the human rights agenda and since human rights has become firmly established in EU foreign policy, this lack of credibility impacts on the EU's influence in its external relations. But while any human rights violation should be actively condemned, Copts do not call for 'special' rights or protection, other than those due to all citizens. On both sides of the challenge the EU is perceived by Copts as failing. In the first aspect because of an inconsistent or weak approach to taking up violations of human rights with authorities despite insisting on including them in agreements such as the AA. Second, the findings suggest that minority rights, especially the national minority rights framework, is not a productive approach for the EU's goals of promoting human rights and stability in the Egyptian context. The EU can have a more effective and influential role by supporting the aims of Egypt's uprising for

⁶⁴ Author interview with Bishop Angaelos, December 2013.

⁶⁵ The Confederation of Egyptian European Business Associations, *EU Funded Projects in Egypt*, online http://www.ceeba.org/uploaded_files_images/file/Studies/EU%20funded%20projects%20in%20Egypt.pdf.

democracy and social justice by emphasising the need for equality and inclusion to achieve these goals. Supporting local frameworks of rights rather than being seen to be imposing an external agenda of rights would also enable the EU to have a more positive impact. The *al-Mawatana*, or active citizenship, discourse provides one potential foundation for a pro-active dialogue between the EU and Egyptian authorities and civil society actors because it is an organic concept developed within the local context. The EU should support education programmes in schools and through civil organisations and inter-faith groups that allow ideas of citizenship and social cohesion to be debated and evolved within Egyptian society. This is crucial for the internalisation of human rights and democratic values in the long term.