

Time to Pressure Egypt

America's many religious communities have among them leaders of good conscience and moral vision—men and women who have supported and championed causes with a strong and unyielding advocacy. When it came to fighting injustice in South Africa, they were there. When it came to protecting the innocent in the Balkans, they were there. When it came to preventing genocide in Darfur, they were there.

So why are they not present in Egypt? When Egyptian Christians are harassed, attacked and massacred, why have America's spiritual leaders muted their voices?

It is a fair question. Egypt is not a far-away speck on the globe, too distant to be reached. It is a major capital of the Arab world and a place central to American geopolitical and economic interests.

Today, it is also a place where our moral values are under attack.

Though they trace their roots to the first century of Christianity and well before the rise of Islam, Copts are best described as second-class citizens of Egypt. The Second Article of the Egyptian Constitution established Shariah law as the principle source of legislation. The denial of equality to non-Muslims is an integral part of the Quran upon which Shariah law is based.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar University, Islam's respected institute of higher learning, declared that all Christians are "kuffar," a word that connotes "enemies" and "evil doers." Sheikh Yassir al-Birhani, a Salafi leader who is a regular on Al Jazeera has espoused that, "Copts are infidels by witness of the Koran; Shall we apologize for the Quran to please them? Allah's curse on them." These, and other proclamations, have promoted Muslim violence towards the

Christian community and encourage official complacency and complicity in the attacks.

There was the Oct. 9 Maspero massacre, where the Egyptian military and Islamists attacked Copts who were peacefully protesting the burning of a Coptic church. At least 24 Copts were killed and 270 injured. In spite of forensic evidence to the contrary, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has denied shooting at, or driving armored vehicles into, the protestors.

There was the senseless killing of Ayman Labib, a 17-year-old Egyptian Christian who was told by his Muslim classmates to remove his cross necklace. He refused, so they beat him to death, while his teachers watched.

Egyptian State Television is also culpable in justifying the religious violence. To broadcast a call to, "protect the army against attacks by Copts," is incitement, pure and simple.

The ongoing attacks pose a frightening analogy to Kristallnacht and the violence toward the German Jewish community before Hitler's genocide was launched. Then, the silence of religious and moral leaders—in Germany and throughout the world—was deafening, and the Nazis understood that silence as acquiescence.

We, however, can raise our voices and be heard. What is going on today is not beyond our means to challenge.

Egypt is considered an ally of the United States. It depends on the goodwill, friendship and support of people across the religious spectrum. Indeed, it has in the past spoken of its Coptic community as proof of its capacity to be part of the international family of free and moral nations.

So let us demand that Egypt protect the rights of all its citizens, including religious and ethnic minorities. Religious and other communications leaders should call on their

colleagues in Egypt to sharply criticize the editors of Egyptian state funded media who allow the incitement to violence to be broadcast. We all need to reach out to the Coptic churches and communities everywhere and offer assistance.

Egypt's government officials must know that if they do not stand for basic human rights, if they do not protect their own citizens, they cannot expect to receive our friendship in return. There needs to be a clear understanding that the aspirations of the Egyptian people will not be supported by American religious and communal leaders nor by the U.S. government should Egypt continue to persecute the Copts. We have insisted on no less from other nations with whom we had less influence.

We all have voices. Let us raise our voices not only in defense of the persecuted Coptic Christians of Egypt, but in pursuit of the moral mission to which all nations and faiths claim to aspire.

Cheryl Halpern *is a council member at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum and is a former chair of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.*