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Title: Sameh Fawzy Comments on the ZIVIC Peacemaking Paper

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This report is accurate, objective, and based on different viewpoints. In addition, the report takes the case of Izbet Bushra, in the governorate of Beni Suef, as a case study of sectarian violence, drawing from it useful lessons learned to improve interreligious relationships in Egyptian society.

When we tackle sectarian incidents, it is important to go beyond specific cases to holistically explore different aspects of the whole picture.

(1)

General Comments

This is an accurate, decisive, and fact-based report; I would like to make some comments which support, deepen, and illustrate the basic arguments upon which the report rely.

- 1-** Although the report is generally constructive in its approach to sectarianism and provides useful recommendations, it may be important for more depth in discussion to include important background readings on sectarianism. The author of the report did not mention or discuss studies written about the sectarian atmosphere in Egypt which have been written during the last twenty years. These studies were authored by a number of prominent scholars and tackled the issue from different perspectives. As such, in my point of view the reliance only on studies on violence in general or even on violence in Egypt in particular is insufficient to better understand the whole matter.
- 2-** The report contains subtle arguments. The basic argument, in my viewpoint, is that the sectarian incident is something related to the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Violence happens when the relationship worsens, and the society has to help them to overcome this situation. This is partially true. If we want to get the holistic picture, however, we have to examine the political climate. Retrospectively, when Egyptians have a "National Project" sectarian clashes fade, or else are brushed aside for the sake of work, co-operation, and the spirit of building. On the contrary, when the

Egyptian society lacks a comprehensive public project, people start to conflict over antagonistic issues. Politics becomes "quarrels" and religious differences become as a "burden" rather than a source of richness. As such, when we study the ebb and flow of sectarianism in Egyptian society, we have to look into political conditions first and foremost.

- 3- Based on what stated in 1&2, I perceived from reading the report that regardless of its accuracy and objectivity, it lacks deep insight into relevant issues related to the sectarian dossier in Egypt. This is partially because it depends mainly on broad readings of sociology and violence studies in general, without digging into relevant studies on sectarianism. Definitely it is good to have modern sociological approaches in this study, but if not seen as a part of cultural analysis of the whole society, it will introduce inadequate explanations of the problems. Sometimes people prefer to see the challenges facing building full-fledged citizenship in Egyptian society as a part of establishing a modern state rather than looking into scattered problems. There is ongoing battle between those who want to pull the society many ages backwards into history and those who see the present in light of the future. Coptic problems are definitely a part of the battle, but other aspects are also included such as women's rights, children's rights, freedom of expression, etc.
- 4- The issue of education has been neglected in the work, despite its impact on the wider society. If we look into the work of NGOs, media, and local leaders, then the issue of education should also be given attention and concern.

(2)

Specific Comments

- 1- Concerning building and repairing churches, it is widely seen as a predicament on the way to achieve full-fledged citizenship. However, this issue is multi-faceted. The report mentioned in page four that Copts and human rights advocates argue the need for a unified law for building houses of worship. This fact is partially true, but other groups mentioned that also, sometimes not in such terms. For example some

Islamists indicated the importance of having new "regulations" in building and repairing churches. The criticism of the current unjust regulatory framework of building Christian houses of worship has come from various political and cultural sources. It would be good to have this law, but if in fact we have a unified law for building and repairing houses of worship, will the Coptic unrest over this problem disappear? We have to be cautious in dealing with this matter. Having a law is not the end of the road, the next issue to emerge will be how to apply the law. Is the bureaucracy in Egypt neutral, or biased? If we look at the issue from the outside we will think that it is a mere legal problem, but if we go deeper, and look into the problem in light of the whole sociological profile of the Egyptian society, we will end up with different explanations.

- 2-** Does the state have a policy in inter-religious relationships? The report, based on different accounts, believes it does not. I share the same perspective, but I would like to go further. The government, except the security apparatus, does not recognize the different aspects of sectarian atmosphere, sometimes endorsing and continuing discriminatory practices as a part of an "inherited practice". Copts, for instance, are denied access to some government positions, although there is no legal justification for this. When it comes to the security apparatus, the report reflected different views on its conduct during sectarian clashes fairly well, but it is a must to highlight that "Coptic problems" are political rather than simply part of a security dossier. A number of scholars, Muslims and Christians alike, repeatedly mention that if the security apparatus has a role in sectarian tensions, this role should not be exclusive; other political organizations should not shirk responsibility as we see nowadays.
- 3-** The report mentioned that Copts in Diaspora are "generally bolder than their counterparts in criticizing the powers responsible for the interpreted lower condition of their Egyptian counterparts". This statement outwardly appears correct, but this is not the actual case. Indeed, expatriate Coptic activists are to a large extent outspoken, but the demands they raise, and the rhetoric they proclaim are mostly

shaped by the hands of Coptic activists inside Egypt. Except for the most extreme demands, which are not agreed upon among Copts themselves, Coptic voices in the Diaspora are echoing the same demands internally and domestically shaped.

- 4- The report made a special emphasis on media and social peace. It has focused on how to develop media ethics and professionalism in dealing with sectarian clashes. This is indeed an important aspect of media work. However, this is not the whole issue. Media has been found over the last few years to be a main player in sectarian conflicts, as its powerful weight shapes people's minds and attitudes. As such, media has been noticeably used by different sides in a conflict to create popularity for their position. This is too difficult to be tracked or tackled, but it is still an important factor to be taken into account.
- 5- Reconciliation sessions occupy a great portion of the report. This is normal, since it is a prime conflict resolution method used in diffusing tension, conflict, and clashes between Muslims and Christians. The report introduced different views on this issue, and tried to lay down some conditions for its success such as the necessity of free participation. Nevertheless, this method sometimes contradicts with the rule of law, and due to this perception many commentators have voiced opposition to reconciliation sessions. It may be useful to document more widely the testimonies of persons who took part in reconciliation sessions to assess the validity of this method. It has been important to see how this method functions in reality, from one conflict to another.

(3)

General Trends

The report ended up with general trends on how to realize social peace. All recommendations made in this field are important and crucial. However, I do prefer to put them within the theory of social capital. It is important to restore good relationships between religious communities, but also to give the same importance to building peace and stability in the whole society. If we build relationships between people based on trustworthiness, trust, and mutual

respect, this will lead to social peace and community stability. It is necessary to build positive relationships between priests and imams, to engage NGOs in building peace, to support citizenship media, and to get community leaders involved in the peace-making process, as the report has suggested. Nevertheless, it is also important to build common interest between both religious communities, which is not explicitly stated in the report. Muslims and Christians should work together in economic projects and should have mutual concern to make such projects safe. Vandalism, often associated with sectarian clashes, will no longer be accepted or tolerated by people who see their joined interests are jeopardized.

In future reports I think it is a must to go a bit deeper, probing further the sectarian environment. Questions such as the following ones should be addressed:

- 1- How can we build a moderate priest and imam? Is it a matter of an accumulative socialization process starting from early educational experiences? If "religious study" is exclusive by definition, how can we develop this approach?
- 2- How can we make the concept of tolerance acceptable to large communities?

By exploring these and other similar questions the project proposed in this report will find a greater chance for success, as interreligious relationships are vital to developing a civil society based on citizenship. As stated earlier in this review, where there is a 'national project', sectarian tensions naturally decrease due to increased cooperation. It is hoped that this report and the project which accompanies it may contribute to this shared concern of most Egyptian citizens.