

# Coptic Population Figures in English Print Media

March 11, 2012

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Published by: Arab West Report



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## I. Introduction

With the rise of Islamization in Egypt, the Coptic population has been on a steady decline since 1927. The Coptic population was at its highest percentage of the total population at 8.34% in 1927, according to the Egyptian census. This number then declined to 7.33% by 1960 and 5.50% by 2000. As Egypt's population grows and the number of Copts becomes less and less a part of it, the disputes between Copts, the government, and Muslims have become increasingly more heated. Often times these debates stem from disagreements over the actual number of Copts in the population. The Coptic Church has chosen to offer a much higher percentage than the number that is listed on the Egyptian census and believed by many scholars to be the more accurate. Disagreements then arise over whether Copts are properly represented in education, government, and other sectors of society. Unfortunately, it is known by many researchers that the actual figures compiled by Egypt's statistics agency, or the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, are kept confidential and thus remain a subject for debate. Because this figure is such a point of contention, it is important to observe how it is represented by different categories in society and, in the case of this paper, in English print media. These figures can then be compared to the Egyptian census, the best and most accurate source available, to draw conclusions about the author's intentions.

In the second half of the twentieth century—in the year 1957 to be specific, when the first article appeared in the *Washington Post* archives, journalists in the English-language press began to focus their stories on the Coptic population in Egypt and even to inflate the number of Copts in the population, in comparison to the Egyptian census. Beginning with the presidency of Anwar Sadat in 1970 and the consecration of Coptic Pope Shenouda in 1971, the prevalence of these articles pertaining to the Coptic population increased.

The period was one of conflict between church and state that included the ouster of the Coptic pope by Anwar Sadat in an effort to curb sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. In 1957, Nasser's government also “issued a decree enforcing the teaching of Islam as a basic subject in the curricula, including in Christian schools, and then seized the Coptic educational endowments”.<sup>1</sup> Sadat succeeded Nasser, Egypt's Socialist president, whose policies and influences Sadat attempted to counter at the outset of his presidency by giving more freedom to Islamists groups. Such actions taken by Sadat gave rise to tensions between Muslim and Christian factions—the focus of many news articles in the coming decades and the source of numerous references to the Coptic population in the media.

By compiling articles in English media pertaining to the Coptic population, I seek to draw conclusions about the numbers as they are cited by English-speaking journalists. This paper will illustrate the varying contexts within which these numbers are referenced, which will reveal the authors' motivations behind an over or underestimation of the total Coptic population in Egypt. It will also become apparent in which year the incidence of references to the Coptic population increased.

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<sup>1</sup>Philippe Fargues. “Demographic Islamization: Non-Muslims in Muslim Countries.” *SAIS Review*, Volume 21, Number 2, Summer-Fall 2001, p 112.

## II. Research Methods

In order to first determine where the increase in articles relating to Copts began, I used Lexis Nexis to search U.S. and non-U.S. newspapers for all dates with the Boolean search terms “Copt!” and “Egypt!” I then performed a similar search using the same Boolean search terms in Proquest under archives for “Proquest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1871-2007),” “Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1994),” and “Proquest Newsstand” for all dates.

## III. Findings

Egypt earned some attention from the media in the early decades of the twentieth century when the country was granted independence from Britain. It was not until the middle of the century during the Nasser era, however, that the Coptic population and Egypt in general was covered in major English-language newspapers. The data compiled for the first 50 years of the twentieth century is sparse with only one article cropping up on Proquest and Lexis Nexis in 1920. Based on this article, which represents the first half of the twentieth century, there is no noteworthy discrepancy in the published ratio of percentages of Copts to the total population. Though these databases cover many of the major news sources such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Toronto Star*, archives for other major English newspapers are not available on these databases, making a more complete picture of early English print-media content inaccessible.

Data for the latter half of the century demonstrates a move toward inflated percentages of Copts beginning in 1957 with an article from the *Washington Post* by Barrett McGurn entitled, “Christians’ Future in Egypt is Dark,” which places Copts at anywhere from 7 to 15 percent of the total population, which is a far cry from the census data of 7.33% in 1960 and 7.92% in 1946.<sup>2</sup> McGurn disparages the Nasser regime for unfulfilled promises to the Coptic population—good cause for him to inflate Coptic percentages.

The general trend in English print media over the time period between 1971, when Pope Shenouda was consecrated until the mid-1990s was to place the Coptic population in Egypt at above 10 percent of the total population. The authors who reported such numbers varied from those who wished to provide backgrounders on the Coptic population in Egypt, to those covering incidents of violence, as in the *New York Times* report on a Muslim attack on Christians in 1992.<sup>3</sup>

Some articles cited the Coptic population between 12 and 14 percent of the total population, which should necessarily be indicative of favoritism toward Copts; however, one article titled “New Church Strife Reported in Egypt” from a 1972 *New York Times* newspaper discusses the burning of a church as well as other episodes of “communal strife” between Copts and Muslims.<sup>4</sup> He cites the number of Copts in the population as a point of reference for the story, but does not list a source, nor discuss this number in any further detail, making his motives for inflating the population percentage unclear.

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<sup>2</sup> Barrett McGurn. “Christians’ Future in Egypt is Dark,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*. 24 Apr 1957.

<sup>3</sup> “Muslim Attack on Egypt’s Copts Leaves 14 Dead,” *New York Times*. 06 May 1992: 9.

<sup>4</sup> “New Church Strife Reported in Egypt,” *New York Times*. 15 Nov 1972.

The second article from a 1993 *New York Times* edition, which lists the Coptic denomination in Egypt at a range of 12.5-14.3%, highlights numerous attacks on the Coptic population.<sup>5</sup> The columnist, Youssef Ibrahim, an Egyptian-born American and Copt himself, believes that economic hardship due to government failures has fueled the rebellion of which Copts have become the primary target.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to quote a local Copt's criticism of the government and lists him as one of 7 to 8 million Copts in the population of 56 million.<sup>7</sup> Here it is clear that the author wishes to demonstrate that the Copts represent a significant segment of the population and still are underrepresented in the school system and deprived of their due respect as a culture that is a "component of Egyptian history".

In *The Independent*, a London newspaper, author Andrew Buncombe cites the Coptic population at 12 million in 1999, which, when using census data, sets the percentage of Copts in the total population at 18%.<sup>8</sup> This number when compared to other articles in that decade is anywhere from 4 to 6 million people greater, yet this discrepancy is not surprising when taken in the context of the article titled, "City Life Cairo: Egypt's Copts Go through Hell to Build a Church". Buncombe lists the difficulties Copts have encountered in restoring the "Hanging Church" in Cairo, quoting a priest and his assistant about the "hell" Copts have to go through to build a church and their lack of "freedom," which the assistant blames on the "Islamic way of thinking".<sup>9</sup> Buncombe presents a clear bias toward the Coptic population here.

One piece that places Egypt's Coptic population at as low as 5% or as high as 15% of the total population, a 1976 *Washington Post* article titled "Egypt's Christian Minority," does so in possibly the most transparent way. Journalist Thomas Lippman explains that it is the church that chooses to claim 6 million members, but goes on to note that others believe the number may be closer to 2 million of 38 million total Egyptians. The article cites some of the suffering of Copts at the hands of Muslims, but also describes their successes as part of Egyptian society in the work place and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Walid Phares writes in his 2002 article for the *Washington Times* that the Copts in Egypt are numbered at 12 million.<sup>11</sup> As a Lebanese Christian, he advocates for Copts and other religious minorities such as Syriacs and Assyro-Chaldeans and criticizes the Arab League for the neglect of these groups in their meeting.<sup>12</sup> The content of his article speaks to his motivation for citing such a high number, which would put the percentage at about 17% of the population, or about 12% higher than the census placed the Copts in 2000.<sup>13</sup> His writing and citing of such inflated percentages proves to be anomalous when compared to that of his colleagues.

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<sup>5</sup> Youssef M. Ibrahim. "Copts are Target as New Strife Roils Egypt," *New York Times*. 5 Jan 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford D. May. "The Muslims' 'Christian Problem,'" *Moment Magazine: Independent Journalism from a Jewish Perspective*. URL: [http://www.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/04/opinion\\_may.html](http://www.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/04/opinion_may.html). March/April 2011. Accessed: 29 Sept 2011.

<sup>7</sup> May, *Moment Magazine*.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Buncombe. "City Life Cairo: Egypt's Copts Go through Hell to Build a Church," *The Independent*. 5 Apr 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Lippman. "Egypt's Christian Minority: Lippman is the Washington Post's Cairo correspondent." *The Washington Post*. 16 May 1976: C3.

<sup>11</sup> Walid Phares. "The Forgotten Victims," *The Washington Times*. 14 Apr 2002: p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> "Walid Phares" *Power Base*. URL: [http://www.powerbase.info/index.php/Walid\\_Phares](http://www.powerbase.info/index.php/Walid_Phares). 14 Nov 2010. Accessed: 27 Sep 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Phares, *The Washington Times*.

#### **IV. Summary and Analysis of Findings**

Egypt's Coptic population over the span of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is cited for a number of reasons. What becomes evident when analyzing the data is the preponderance of articles overestimating the number of Copts in Egypt's populace. In most of these pieces, the author's bias toward the Coptic population is clear, making an explanation as to why the authors would choose to cite such high numbers a simple task. In stating overinflated numbers, the authors wish to paint a picture of underrepresentation or neglect in the system, where it be in education or other areas such as government or legally.

Even without the unambiguous context within which these numbers are presented, Scholar Philippe Fargues corroborates this fact in his paper, "Demographic Islamization: Non-Muslims in Muslim Countries," from *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*. Fargues examines the data and other evidence to draw his conclusions about the veracity of the Egyptian census despite the broad spectrum of rivaling numbers presented.

"The graph formed by ten Egyptian censuses over the century from 1897 to 1996," Fargues asserts, "is perfectly regular despite changes in the attitude of political forces and society toward Christians." Dr. Fargues also investigated the number of births, marriages, and deaths—events, he notes, which are important religious rites where a person's true religion is revealed in records. He found the censuses to be consistent with these numbers, making it a reliable source for the actual number of Copts in Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis begs the question of the overall perception in the English-speaking or Western population of the total Copts in Egypt. Further, how has the Muslim population reacted to these articles?

#### **V. Muslim reaction to English print media and other opinions**

When searching the internet for opinions of Muslims, I used Google Translate to search foreign sites using the terms "Coptic Christian population Egypt". The results produced were mainly those of personal blogs. Content-wise, the opinions are focused on the Pope's reaction to the Vatican's announcement of the Coptic population in Egypt in 2011, the inflated numbers in English media, and the Pope's statements about the Coptic population.

One blog entry in particular, titled "What is the Number of Copts in Egypt?" by Osama Hafez, points to the inflated numbers specifically, in the *New York Times*. He cites the number 20% as shown in the *New York Times* and uses similar numbers to the Egyptian census, such as 8.33% in 1927. He also discusses the Pope's statements about the number of Copts he believes are in Egypt. Hafez closes his entry by stating that the falsification of numbers by Copts is detrimental to national unity.<sup>15</sup>

A forum for Muslim dialogue entitled, "Forum for Muhammad, Peace be upon Him and his Brother

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<sup>14</sup> Fargues, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Osama Hafez. "What is the real number of Copts?" 21 Dec 2008. URL: <http://aljame3.net/ib/index.php?showtopic=6609>

'Isá, Peace be upon Him" offers an article for debate roughly translated as, "Surprise of the caliber of a reminder: Vatican announces the number of Christians of Egypt 4 million and a half". The article focuses on the Vatican's announcement online that the number of Christians is around 6% of the population and the outrage from Pope Shenouda and other Christian leaders who argue that the population is around 11%.<sup>16</sup>

Surprisingly, there is not a very visible reaction to the numbers presented by English media. After sifting through several hundred articles translated from Arabic, it seems that the main focus of the content is on the Vatican's numbers or the Pope's statements, rather than the English media's role in numbers debate. It is likely the case that my search terms did not reveal some of the more inflammatory comments that have been written about the English media's portrayals.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The data on Coptic population numbers in English-language media varies greatly over the century covered in this paper. Some numbers are presented to support a clear bias shown in the content of the author's article, while others adhere more closely to the Egyptian census data for their respective reporting year, indicating that they do not wish to sway opinions with numbers. Fargues provides solid evidence that the Egyptian census is the most accurate source to use when seeking the actual population numbers. In this study, it becomes a useful tool in analyzing how the English media has chosen to represent Coptic figures.

The Muslim opinions about the English media's representation of Coptic figures seem to take a backseat to the Pope and the Vatican's recent commentary on the subject. This fact might indicate the role of or weight that English media has in the minds of Muslims. Perhaps there is a language barrier, or that the search terms used did not reveal the true temperament of the online Muslim presence.

Regardless, there appears to be a struggle by Copts to defend their rights as a minority in Egypt in the midst of a growing Muslim population, a situation made worse by the actions of Presidents Nasser and Sadat in the mid-twentieth century. Since that time, Coptic numbers have been decreasing and thus the fight to achieve rights as a shrinking element of Egyptian society has become an arduous task. It seems a safe assumption that so long as the Coptic population is decreasing, the quarreling over the actual number of Copts will only continue to swell.

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<sup>16</sup> 30 May 2011. URL: <http://www.muslim.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-438218.html>.

Table 1.

Source	Article	Year	Census Data			Information from Article		
			Total pop	Copts	% total	Total Pop	Copts	% total
		1917	12 m	1.0 m	8.07%			
NYT	“Paradox...”	1920				13 m	900 k	7%
		1927	12 m	1.2 m	8.34%			
Washington Post	“Christians’ Future...”	1957						7-15%
		1960	26 m	1.9 m	7.33%			
NYT	“Nasser, Attending...”	1965				30 m	4 m	13%
		1966	30 m	2.0 m	6.74%			
Washington Post	“Coptic Pope Chosen...”	1971				34 m	4 m	12%
NYT	“New Church Strife...”	1972				35 m	5 m	14%
NYT	“Egypt at a Glance”	1974				35.9 m	2.5 m	7%
Washington Post	“Egypt’s Christian Minority: Lippman is The Washington Post’s Cairo correspondent.”	1976	38 m	2.3 m	6.24%	38 m	2-6m	5-15%
NYT	“Coptic Church is Ancient and Isolated”	1981				42 m	6-10 m	14-23%
NYT	“Distress Signal from Egypt”	1981				43 m	6 m	13%
The Globe and Mail (Canada)	“Egypt Upholds Ban”	1983				45 m	6 m	13%
The Guardian (London)	“Communal Problems...”	1984				47 m	6 m	13%
NYT	“Egypt Tries to Curb Fundamentalists”	1985				48 m	2-3 m	4-6%
NYT	“Coptic Dusk in Cairo: The Faithful and the Wary”	1986	48 m	2.8 m	5.87%	48m	<5 m	<10%
Toronto Star	“A moderate Christian presence in Egypt”	1987				49 m	5 m	10%
Sydney Morning	“Religious Riot...”	1987				>50 m	6 m	12%

Herald (Australia)								
Manchester Guardian Weekly	“Siege Mentality Grips...”	1988				50-60 m	5-6 m	10%
Toronto Star	“Christians in Exodus”	1991				55 m	5.5-9 m	10%
NYT	“Muslim Attack on Egypt's Copts Leaves 14 Dead”	1992				58 m	6 m	6%
NYT	“Copts Target as New Strife”	1993				56 m	7-8 m	12.5-14.3%
Toronto Star	“Egypt's Christians Harbor...”	1993				56 m	est. 6 m	11%
		1996	59 m	3.3 m	5.70%			
The Irish Times	“Copts Face Pervasive...”	1996				60 m	4 m	6%
Deutsche Presse-Agentur	“Egyptian Government...”	1998				60 m	3, 8-10 m	5, 13-16%
The Independent (London)	“Egypt's Copts Go...”	1999				67 m	12 m	18%
		2000	67 m	3.7 m	5.50%			
Washington Times	“The Forgotten Victims”	2002				69 m	12 m	17%
Agence France Presse	“Seven Copts...”	2010				80 m	8 m	10%
Daily News Egypt	“Egypt's Coptic Christians...”	2010				80 m	8 m	10%
Middle East Reporter	“Pope Shenouda...”	2010				80 m	5-8 m	6-10%

\*Calculated numbers are in grey.

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