***The Issue of Religious Persecution*: Coptic Solidarity Conference: June 21st 2018:**

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**The first time I attended your conference I was the guest of my friend, Dr. Helmy Guirguis – Founder of the UK Copts and, in 2015, at a Memorial Service at the Royal Society of Medicine I was privileged to give a Tribute to Helmy. I would not wish to begin today without honouring the memory of a great man and good friend.**

**He would want me to begin my remarks about the nature of religious persecution by reminding you how quickly discrimination can morph into persecution and how uncontained persecution can morph into crimes against humanity and genocide. Just as night follows day, when we turn a blind eye to the one it inexorably leads on to the other.**

While a member of the House of Commons, I had been one of the founders of Jubilee Campaign – a charity which, among other things, campaigns for freedom of religion and belief – rights conferred under Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Jubilee had been founded in response to the murder, incarceration and egregious violations of the human rights of countless men and women in the former Soviet Union.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Jubilee wanted to refocus its work and, in the 1990s, asked me to travel to Egypt and to publish a report into the discrimination experienced by Egypt’s Copts.

That visit opened my eyes to the suffering and persecution of the Copts and to the wonderful story of this ancient apostolic church, rooted in the earliest accounts of Christianity. I was privileged to visit St. Mark’s in Cairo and to meet the late Pope Shenouda III.

In the report that I subsequently published I highlighted the rank discrimination experienced by the Coptic community and the world’s complete indifference.

That indifference, and a failure by the world community to take religious persecution seriously, led to an appalling escalation, and, in 2013, to an orgy of violence, which I described as reminiscent of Europe’s Kristallnacht – with Coptic churches, homes and business desecrated and attacked.

In November 1938, on *Kristallnacht,* the sledgehammers and petrol had left more than 1,000 synagogues burnt and over 7,000 Jewish shops and businesses in ruins. The streets were covered in shards of smashed glass from broken windows.

Compare the charred husk of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue in Berlin, in 1938, with pictures taken in August 2013 of the blackened walls of Degla’s ruined Church of the Virgin Mary, and you will readily see why this comparison is accurate and apt.

In 1938 *The Times*said that:*“No foreign propagandist bent upon blackening Germany before the world could outdo the tale of burnings and beatings, of blackguardly assaults on defenceless and innocent people, which disgraced that country yesterday.”*

In August 2013, in an almost identical vein, *The Times* reported how *“Dozens of churches, homes and businesses have been set alight and looted in Egypt, forcing millions of Christians into hiding amid the worst bout of sectarian violence in the country’s modern history. Some Coptic Christian communities are being made to pay bribes as local Islamists exploit the turmoil by seeking to revive a seventh-century tax, called jizya, levied on non-Muslims.”*

*The Sunday Times* described how in one village *“First they daubed the Christians’ shops and homes with a red cross. Then the mob stormed the police station before turning its wrath on the church.”*

Attacks on the Copts, who number around 10% of the 85 million Egyptian population occurred throughout the country; and the attacks occurred in a climate of impunity – with the perpetrators terrorising at leisure.

As in 1938 – where was the world in speaking out against the terrorisation and persecution of a religious minority?

The former British Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks – always mindful of the events which led to *Kristallnacht*described the assault on the Copts as *“a tragedy going almost unremarked”* and is the *“religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing”*.

Of course, this virus of hatred is no respecter of boundaries. This was graphically illustrated, in 2015, in Libya when 21 men 20 from Egypt, one from Ghana - were murdered by ISIS.

Finally, in May, after a three-year wait and a number of broken promises, the Egyptian Coptic families of those beheaded have finally received their loved ones’ remains.

Pope Tawadros II, accompanied by several bishops, priests and deacons, welcomed the 20 coffins at the Cairo airport, from where the coffins were transported to the village of Al-Our in Minya province, and to the Church of the Martyrs of Faith and Homeland

Ebtsam Noshi Lamei, the widow of another of the victims, Samuel Alham Wilson, said “I’m very proud of my husband Samuel because he was martyred on the name of Jesus Christ and he didn’t renounce the faith. He honoured me, his sons and Christianity.”

Yet, despite the welcome intervention by President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to bring home the bodies of these martyrs, discrimination and persecution continue.

On April 9, 2017, on Palm Sunday, the start of the Holy Week, two Egyptian Coptic churches became a target for terrorists. At least 27 people were killed in the explosion at St. George’s Coptic church in Tanta and 17 people lost their lives in St Mark’s Coptic church in Alexandria. Over a hundred people were injured in both attacks. A few hours after the attacks, Daesh claimed responsibility for the unleashed terror.

The attacks in Egypt add to the legacy of international terror with which we have become so familiar in Syria and Iraq. It also adds to the legacy of the terrorist attacks specifically targeting Christian communities worldwide – to which I will return.

Last month in Egypt there as a new report of yet more young Christian women being abducted and forced to convert to Islam. At least seven Coptic Christian women and girls disappeared in Egypt last month, in what is becoming a recurring phenomenon.

The stories of Christine Lamie, 26, a mother-of-two; 17-year-old Briskam; Meray, a second-year student; sixteen-year-old Hoda Atef Ghali Girgis; Mary Adly Milad, 40, a mother-of three from Minya Governorate, who disappeared on 5 April – bring shame of those who abducted them and tragedy into the lives of every woman and their families.

In each case, the family of the woman says she was abducted by a Muslim who wished to convert her to Islam and marry her.

All the disappearances have been reported to the police. However, their families allege that they have often been met with inaction or indifference. Some have even claimed that members of the police force were involved in the disappearances.

Where here is the voice of international indignation?

There can be no peace or stability in Egypt - or in any of the other countries in the region - if the authorities fail to uphold the rule of law; fail to intervene in preventing attacks; fail to bring perpetrators to justice; or by ignoring the violent rhetoric which whips up hatred.

In a climate of fear and intimidation, coupled with historic and long-standing discrimination, it is little wonder that people try to flee. But, be clear, not only is this a humanitarian outrage.

If such ethnic and religious cleansing succeeded, and a country without diversity, without tolerance for difference, is created it will be a wretched place for all its people – not just the numerical minority. All the evidence shows that countries that make a virtue of religious freedom are the most prosperous, the most stable and the most advanced societies.

All of this has been happening while western governments and international bodies have a blind- spot about religious persecution.

This makes a mockery of their claims to prioritise human rights. Their human rights agendas are partial and selective.

The United Nations cannot strengthen, promote and protect human rights if it does not prioritise religious freedom.

In a new report on Anti-Conversion Laws and the International Response, Alliance Defending Freedom says that “some UN entities, especially special rapporteurs, have highlighted the problems with anti-conversion laws, but other (UN) entities have failed to condemn them”. This, they say, is “emblematic of the UN’s overall failure to protect religious freedom”. This can “give licence” to extremists to persecute minority religious groups.

Reports from Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors, CSW and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) have been portraying the dire situation of religious groups worldwide, providing examples of the persecution suffered, and explaining its impact. Their reports are filled with instances of abuse, humiliation, violence perpetrated against religious groups because of them expressing their religious belief, manifesting their religious belief in the public or merely belonging to or identifying themselves with a religious group.

In January, Open Doors released its World Watch List, 2018: an annual ranking of 50 countries where it is the most difficult (if not impossible) to live as Christians. Open Doors assessed that in 11 countries this persecution was extreme and in 24 very high.

The Oxford Dictionary defines persecution as *‘hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs; oppression.’* However, persecution is not univocally understood, has several definitions, including a legal definition under the Rome Statute.

According to Article 7(2)(g) of the Rome Statute, persecution ‘means the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity.’ As such, persecution is a crime against humanity under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute.

The crime of persecution is a form of discrimination based on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious or gendered grounds.

However, the crime of persecution can be even more severe. The crime of persecution can eventually lead to genocide if all other elements of genocide are established. It has been argued that extreme persecution can amount to genocide if the persecution is intended to achieve the destruction of a group in whole or in part. Indeed, the Trial Chamber in *Prosecutor v Kupreškić*  found that:

*‘Persecution as a crime against humanity is an offence belonging to the same genus as genocide … In both categories what matters is the intent to discriminate: to attack persons on account of their ethnic, racial, or religious characteristics … Thus, it can be said that, from the viewpoint of mens rea, genocide is an extreme and most inhuman form of persecution. To put it differently, when persecution escalates to the extreme form of willful and deliberate acts designed to destroy a group or part of a group, it can be held that such persecution amounts to genocide.’*

This argument has also been used by a genocide scholar, Gregory Stanton, who has argued that persecution can be one of the stages leading to genocide. In his ten stages of genocide, persecution occupies eight stage that Stanton describes as:

*‘Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. Death lists are drawn up. In state sponsored genocide, members of victim groups may be forced to wear identifying symbols. Their property is often expropriated. Sometimes they are even segregated into ghettoes, deported into concentration camps, or confined to a famine-struck region and starved.  Genocidal massacres begin.  They are acts of genocide because they intentionally destroy part of a group.’*

In any event, it must be emphasised that many of the reports on persecution, for example, perpetrated against religious groups do not refer to the Rome Statute definition of persecution but they use the word ‘persecution’ to describe a wide range of treatment suffered by those groups, from discrimination to physical violence.

And Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world.

Research published in August 2011 by Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life revealed that Christians were harassed in 130 countries (between mid-2006 and mid-2009). In 104 countries, the harassment was conducted by governments and organisations, and in 100 countries, by social groups and individuals.

The harassment of Christians was the highest in the Middle East and North Africa (90 percent of countries). However, Christians were also harassed in more than two-thirds of European countries (69 percent), 37 percent of American countries, 71 percent of Asian countries and 68 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa. The situation has not improved over the recent years. To the contrary, over the years, several other research centres and international institutions have confirmed this conclusion.

Christmas and Easter, the two most important Christian celebrations that attract large numbers of Christians to churches and other places of worship, become the primary targets. Churches and places of Christian worship become the primary target during those celebrations as it is clear that an attack during these celebrations will result in a large number of causalities. Some of the recent attacks utilising this tactic include the Lahore Easter attack and the Mindanao Christmas attack. During Easter Sunday on March 27, 2016, at least 75 people were killed in Lahore, Pakistan, when a suicide bomber blew himself in a park during the Christian celebration. At least 16 people were wounded in a grenade explosion outside of a Catholic church in Mindanao, Philippines.

I have visited and taken evidence in a South East Asian Detention Centre where escaping Pakistani Christians are held. Caged like animals they told me stories of Christians burnt alive, terrorized, intimidated or forced to convert. The heroism of the murdered Christian minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti – whose killers have never been brought to justice – and the imprisoned Christian woman, Asia Bibi, sentenced to death on so called Blasphemy charges - is emblematic of the suffering of Pakistan’s Christians.

And the list goes on because the persecution of Christians is not being taken seriously enough.

This is because Christianity is perceived as the majority religion and hence it is difficult to see Christians as victims. Christianity is indeed a majority religion in Western countries. However, Christians constitute a minority group in many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, places where Christianity is on a verge of disappearance.

The response to the persecution of Christians (including terror attacks) is predominately reactive and not preventive. The steps undertaken respond to the single attack, rather than learning from the reoccurring incidents of violence to prevent further attacks. This is also the approach taken in Egypt. In response to the Palm Sunday attacks, President al-Sisi introduced a state of emergency for the next three months and deployed the military to secure the infrastructure. The government announced three days of mourning. The government promised to establish a new body to counter extremism and terrorism.

This is all welcome but is reactive and doesn’t get to the root causes.

The response to religious persecution greatly depends on the actor responsible for this persecution.

Religious persecution can be perpetrated by several different actors. However, the main perpetrators are 1) the State; 2) religious communities persecuting other religious communities; 3) religious communities enforcing conformity.

For example, if it is the State that is persecuting religious community or communities (most commonly religious minorities), it is crucial to open a political dialogue with the government to ensure that the State introduces protections of the right to freedom or religion or belief in accordance with international standards (and protections of other rights, including the right to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and associations, or specific rights of minorities) and has strong enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the legal provisions are translated into empirical reality.

Where atrocities are perpetrated by religious communities, it is crucial to ensure that any such acts are adequately investigated and prosecuted. It is also elementary to combat the atmosphere of hostility against other religious communities and open the interfaith dialogue, focus on religious education embedding tolerance and respect to other religions: upholding the dignity of difference.

The response to religious persecution will also greatly depend on the level of atrocities. In some cases, political dialogue to respond to state perpetrated persecution will not be enough. Steps towards criminal justice may be needed.

In any event, we, as the international community, can do far more to address the issue of religious persecution.

The ever-growing level of religious persecution worldwide demands a systematic and structured approach.

We need affirmative steps to stop the perpetrators; to assist the survivors; and to prosecute the perpetrators but this will not work without cooperation between States and international institutions. Religious persecution must receive adequate international attention as an issue on its own and not in conjunction with other issues. An appropriate action plan to prevent or address religious persecution is urgently required.

One step in the pursuit of such a plan, would be the creation of an official UN led day commemorating the victims and survivors of religious persecution.

Currently, there is no UN designated day to focus on any aspects of religious freedom or religious persecution and only some States observe such a day at the national level. Such a day could be used to raise awareness of the issue of religious persecution and to work on introducing positive steps to combat it, wherever and whenever it occurs.

The day should be used to work towards an action plan to adequately address the religious aspect of such mass atrocities as those perpetrated by Daesh. Without acknowledging and addressing the religious character of such atrocities, there will never be an effective response.

We are fast approaching the fourth anniversary of the attack on the Yazidis sheltering on Sinjar. It was the the day on which the fate and future of the Yazidi community changed forever, together with the fate of other religious minorities in the region.

Perhaps August 3rd could be used to highlight our responsibility to victims and survivors of such mass atrocities. The survivors should play an active role in any decision making. The memory of the victims should motivate to achieve more clarity in the approach taken. And religious persecution should never be tolerated ever again, independently of the level of persecution, independently from the actor conducting the atrocities, whenever and wherever it occurs.

One thing is for sure: the international community can and must do better.

With an ever-growing level of religious persecution worldwide, the issue requires a systematic and structured approach; and a recognition that those societies that promote religious freedom will proper and be stable and good places to be; and that those who refuse to take the cause of religious persecution seriously will decay – and will deserve to.