

# Coptic migration figures of EUHRO disputed

**Author:** Jaco Stoop  
**Academic Supervisors:** Drs. Cornelis Hulsman



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The Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translations  
90 Road 14B El-Maadi, Cairo, Egypt  
Telephone: +20 2 23598087  
URL: [www.arabwestreport.info](http://www.arabwestreport.info)  
E-mail: [info@cidtegypt.com](mailto:info@cidtegypt.com)

A press release of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organizations stated that they published a report on Coptic migration figures on September 27, 2011 and that it was sent to the Egyptian Cabinet and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). No one has seen this report thus far.

According to the press release, emigration of Copts has substantially increased after the March referendum on constitutional amendments and the escalation in attacks on Copts. "If emigration of Christians, who constitute nearly 16% of the Egyptian population, continues at the present rate, it may reach 250,000 by the end of 2011," said Najīb Jibrā'īl, "and within ten years a third of the Coptic population of Egypt would be gone."<sup>1</sup>

The claim of Jibrā'īl is controversial. It was disputed by *Watani* newspaper editor Yūsuf Sīdhum in an interview with Cornelis Hulsman on December 2, 2011. Sīdhum then stated, "Najīb Jibrā'īl is not telling the truth. Many foreign media outlets have called me about this. I wonder—how is it possible that people accept such a text that does not mention its sources? We at *Watani* have tried to investigate this." Sīdhum then explains what they have done and concluded that Najīb Jibrā'īl's figures are much too high. Sīdhum also does not believe the number of Copts to be 16 percent of the Egyptian population (approximately 13 million people). He rather believes it to be closer to 10 percent.<sup>2</sup>

#### *References to the EUHRO's press release in English media*

On September 27, *AINA* published the press release of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organizations.<sup>3</sup> Two days earlier, Egyptian newspaper *Al-Misrī al-Yawm* gave prominent attention to the claims on their English website (which was recently renamed and is now called the *Egypt Independent*).<sup>4</sup> The newspaper also quoted Coptic writer, Kamal Zakher, as doubting Jibrā'īl's claims, but gives this much less attention than the claims themselves. However, Kamal Zakher also stated that concern over Coptic migration is justifiable. Although Zakher argues that it is impossible that the 25 January Revolution affected the current figures because migration procedures take up to a year to complete, no criticism of the Jibrā'īl's figures is reported in the article.

*Arab-West Report* published the full text of the press release, written by Jibrā'īl, on September 29.<sup>5</sup> Editor-in-Chief, Cornelis Hulsman, told me that he had asked Jibrā'īl in October for a copy of the report to which the press release referred, but found it unavailable. Hulsman then made an appointment with Jibrā'īl for an interview, but

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Abdelmassih, "100,000 Christians Have Left Egypt Since March: Report," *AINA*, September 27, 2011, <http://www.aina.org/news/20110926194822.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelis Hulsman, "Christian leader: No fear for Islamist landslide in Egypt", *Arab-West Report*, Week 1, Art. 22, January 1, 2012, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-1/22-christian-leader-no-fear-islamist-landslide-egypt>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Emad Khalil, "NGO report: 93,000 Copts left Egypt since March", *Egypt Independent*, September 25, 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/499187>.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Najīb Jibrā'īl, "EUHRO: Message of warning for military council and Egypt's government", *Arab-West Report*, Week 39, Art. 41, September 29, 2011, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-39/41-euhro-message-warning-military-council-and-egypts-government>.

when he arrived, Jibrāʿīl had left for another event that he apparently found more important.<sup>6</sup>

Mike Elkin referred to the report in his November 30, 2011 article in the *New York Times* and its international edition, the *International Herald Tribune*.<sup>7</sup> Elkin does not question Jibrāʿīl's claims, evidently since this did not fit the objective of his story; portraying fear among Egyptian Christians for the growing political influence of Islamists.

That same day, Michael Weiss wrote a blog post for the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, also citing the estimates made by EUHRO.<sup>8</sup> Weiss refers to a report by the American foreign policy think-tank, *The Henry Jackson Society* (of which Weiss is Communications Director). The report cites the numbers reported by EUHRO, but also states that, “[w]hile these figures have not been independently confirmed, they suggest mass emigration may be possible if religious minorities are not adequately protected in post-Mubarak Egypt.”<sup>9</sup> Besides these influential news outlets, the report was also cited on numerous blogs and websites.

Raymond Ibrahim, a regular contributor to *Jihad Watch*, wrote an article in which he referred to the EUHRO report, titled, “Egyptian Copts Running for Their Lives,” which has been published on a number of websites. The *Al-Misrī al-Yawm/Egypt Independent* article has also been cited or even republished on a few websites. Some of these websites quote Ibrahim, who has written some articles on Copts in Egypt and Islamists in general.

Ibrahim's article originally appeared on *Frontpagemag.com*, the website of David Horowitz's, Freedom Center, a right-wing American organization. The article was also posted on the pro-Israel blog *Israpundit.com*. Other blogs that have republished or referred to Ibrahim's article are “Jewish Press International” ([jewpi.com](http://jewpi.com)) and “Ruthfully yours” ([ruthfullyyours.com](http://ruthfullyyours.com)). All these websites or blogs are without exception right-wing and some of them are openly anti-Islamist.

What follows is a short overview of the English-language websites and blogs that reported Jibrāʿīl's claims without much (or any, for that matter) rebuttal.

- [frontpagemag.com](http://frontpagemag.com)
- [jewpi.com](http://jewpi.com)
- [ruthfullyyours.com](http://ruthfullyyours.com)
- [israpundit.com](http://israpundit.com)
- [egyptindependent.com](http://egyptindependent.com)
- [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)

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<sup>6</sup> Email of Cornelis Hulsman, February 25, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Elkin, “Egypt's Christians Prepare for New Political Climate,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/world/middleeast/egyptian-christians-get-political.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/world/middleeast/egyptian-christians-get-political.html?_r=1).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Weiss, “Egyptian women: your new government will want you back in the kitchen,” *The Telegraph*, December 1, 2011, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/michaelweiss/100120905/egyptian-women-your-new-government-will-want-you-back-in-the-kitchen/>.

<sup>9</sup> “The Egyptian Elections: a preliminary political assessment of the post-Mubarak era,” *The Henry Jackson Society*, November 2011, <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/EgyptFuture2.pdf>.

- [blogs.telegraph.co.uk](http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk)
- [aina.org](http://aina.org)
- [eurasiareview.org](http://eurasiareview.org)

### *References to the EUHRO's press release in Arabic media*

A number of Egyptian newspapers have cited the EUHRO report. The privately owned newspaper *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd*, in an article on Coptic migration published on October 12, 2011 titled, “The Copts... migration is sometimes forced,” quotes the exact numbers given in the AINA press release.<sup>10</sup> However, this article is far more thorough in its research and criticism of Jibrā’īl’s claims than the *Al-Misrī al-Yawm* article. Besides Coptic author Kamal Zakher, *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd* also reports the statements of at least two other Copts who say they do not believe the migration figures to be correct.

According to the article, the publishing of the EUHRO report “stirred huge controversy in Coptic circles”. A Coptic journalist, who is the daughter of a well-known Egyptian author (she refused to give her name), said that these kind of reports have been used for a long time to create sedition in Egypt. She accuses Jibrā’īl of “playing the Coptic card” by overstating the migration of Copts in order to receive more attention for this case and the situation of Copts in general. Jibrā’īl rejects this accusation and states that his organization is a normal human rights organization that also focuses on other issues like Egyptian workers in Libya and Saudi Arabia. The article also quotes “a source close to the church,” who agrees with Jibrā’īl. He wonders why Jibrā’īl would lie about these migration figures, because “Why would Copts invoke evil upon their country with lies while they find security and peace there [in Egypt]?”

A spokesperson for the Coptic Orthodox Church, who also refused to give his name, commented further on Jibrā’īl’s figures, rejecting his statements. The spokesperson said that the Church does not keep track of the migration figures of Copts and cited the late Pope Shenouda who said, “Egypt is the country that lives in us, not a country we live in.”

Overall, the article in *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd* is much more objective and extensive than *Al-Misrī al-Yawm*’s article. More attention was given to critics of the EUHRO report and Jibrā’īl’s statements and *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd* also reports the position of the Coptic Orthodox Church on this issue, although the title of the article (“The Copts... migration is sometimes forced”) might suggest otherwise.

Two days after *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd* published its article, *Al-Wafd* also quoted the EUHRO report and the press release in an article on Egypt’s Copts titled, “A season of migration of Copts to the West”.<sup>11</sup> This article is quite similar to the *Al-Shurūq al-*

<sup>10</sup> Dina Darwish, “Al-aqbāt.. al-hijra qasriyya ahyānan (The Copts...Migration is sometimes forced),” *Al-Shurūq al-Jadīd*, October 12, 2011, <http://al-Shurūq al-Jadīdnews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=12102011&id=da27be15-61e6-4b8d-b828-c14bd76369a5>.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahāb ‘Ilīwah, “Mawsim hijra al-aqbāt ilā al-gharb,” *Al-Wafd*, October 14, 2011, <http://www.alwafd.org/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/13-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%>

*Jadīd* article, in that it also criticizes Jibrāʿīl and quotes two Copts, one of them a computer engineer named Mīnā Tūsūn, who both disagree with Najīb Jibrāʿīl. One big difference is, however, that the newspaper cites Gamāl Asʿad, a Coptic thinker. He strongly disagrees with Jibrāʿīl and states that, “Copts take advantage of sectarian strife to travel abroad,” while embassies of countries of the European Union and the United States encourage Copts to migrate. He even goes further, saying that there is a Zionist conspiracy to divide the Middle East using sectarianism, as according to Asʿad has happened in Sudan with the secession of mostly Christian South Sudan from predominantly Islamic Sudan.

By quoting Asʿad, *al-Wafd* takes a stronger stand against Jibrāʿīl. At the same time, he is the only one in the article who opposes Asʿad’s ideas of a Zionist conspiracy. The way in which these quotes are presented suggests an implicit endorsement of Asʿad’s statements.

The London-based Arabic online news service *Elaph*, which is one of the most widely-read Arabic news outlets founded by Saudi Arabian businessman Othman al-Omeir,<sup>12</sup> also cites the report in an article published on December 9.<sup>13</sup> According to the article, tens of thousands of Copts applied for emigration after the first round of parliamentary elections in November 2011. The article states that press releases of the Coptic Orthodox Church point out that thousands of Copts have applied for migration after Islamists obtained a large percentage of the vote in the elections.<sup>14</sup>

Although, according to the article, exact numbers of Egyptian Copts living abroad do not exist, *Elaph* reports Jibrāʿīl’s claims that more than 100,000 Copts requested emigration between March, 2011 and September 27, 2011. There is a noteworthy difference between this article and the aforementioned articles; according to *Elaph*, the Copts requested migration, instead of actually migrating to, for example, the United States.

It is, however, just a minor difference, because the article does not contain much rebuttal of EUHRO’s claims. Only in the last paragraph, some criticism is voiced by Rifaat Sayed Ahmed, head of the Jaffa Center for Studies and Research. He says that Coptic fear for Islamists is exaggerated. He added that he would not rule out the possibility that the high figures were influenced by the current economic circumstances in Egypt, more than the political situation. Ahmed did not criticize the actual numbers as presented by EUHRO. Moreover, the article does not make one

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Khoder, “Elaph: the Number Online Newspaper in the Arab World,” *Arab Press Network*, January 30, 2009, <http://www.arabpressnetwork.org/articlesv2.php?id=3002> and Othman Al-Omeir, “The Murdoch of the Middle East,” *Majalla*, May 21, 2010, <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2010/05/article5555857>.

<sup>13</sup> Sabry Hassanayn, “Hijra al-aqbāt.. dawāfi‘ iqtisādiyya yu‘azzizaha al-khawf min hukm al-islāmiyyīn (Copts Migration.. Reinforced by economic motives of fear of Islamist rule),” *Elaph*, December 9, 2011, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2011/12/701273.html>.

<sup>14</sup> This is very unlikely, because the Church rarely gives out press releases and certainly not on sensitive subjects – the article may thus confuse press releases of Coptic activist Jibrāʿīl with that of the Church.

reference to the controversy the report has stirred, while even *Al-Misrī al-Yawm* has done so.

Finally, the state-owned Egyptian *al-Ahram al-Arabi* (a weekly publication of the daily newspaper *al-Ahram*) published an article by Amin Amr Farouq on December 31, 2011, which criticized the estimates made by EUHRO, on December 28. Its title leaves no doubt: “Migration of Egyptian Copts. False numbers and baseless fear.” The article stated that the numbers were false and that the fear is baseless (“arqām kādhiba wa-makhāwif ghayr ḥaqīqiyya”).<sup>15</sup>

Hany Labib, an Egyptian writer and managing director of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT), states that migration figures can be confirmed in two ways: either through foreign embassies or through the Ministry of Interior.<sup>16</sup> However, neither of these two instances have confirmed the numbers, according to Labib. He also stated that it is unlikely for so many Copts to have left Egypt in such a short period after the Revolution, especially due to the costs associated with migration. *Al-Ahram al-Arabi* also quotes Kamal Zakher, who repeats his criticism of Jibrā’īl’s claims.

### *Conclusions*

There is a remarkable difference in reporting between the English-language press and the Arabic-language newspapers. Generally speaking, Arabic or Egyptian newspapers are more critical of the migration figures as presented by EUHRO, whereas critics of Jibrā’īl’s report remain underreported in English language articles like that of the *New York Times* and *Al-Misrī al-Yawm*.

It is fair to say that Najīb Jibrā’īl and EUHRO succeeded in spreading their figures throughout written English media, as a number of news agencies reported on the issue and several articles simply adopted their figures without counterclaims, while the Arabic media’s reporting appears more objective; also giving voice to people critical of Najīb Jibrā’īl’s claims.

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<sup>15</sup> Aymān ‘Amr Fārūq, “Hijra aqbāt Miṣr. Arqām kādhiba wa-makhāwif ghayr ḥaqīqiyya (Migration of Copts in Egypt. False numbers and unreal fears),” *Al-Ahram al-Arabi*, December 28, 2011, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/Policy.aspx?Serial=754913>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*