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Egypt's Dominant Muslim Identity and its Consequences

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The national identity imparted to contemporary Egyptian pupils through their school textbooks is dominated exclusively by an Arab and Muslim self. Almost no room is allotted to other national components, notably the Coptic one.

On the one hand, the Copts are presented in Egyptian schoolbooks as an integral part of the Egyptian nation. Their religion and language are presented as national tools of resistance against Roman and Byzantine rule. They are depicted as having welcomed Islam, which liberated them from Byzantine rule. Furthermore, these textbooks outline how in 1919, the Copts took an active part in the first national revolution "*with no distinction between Muslims and Copts ... on the basis of Egyptian nationalism alone, not on the basis of religion*". This made Egypt the only Arab state whose people were not torn apart by religious and ethnic bigotry. Consequently Muslims and Copts "*adopt a flag on which there was a crescent and within it a cross...*"

On the other hand, Egyptian schoolbooks avoid mentioning explicitly the terrible repression inflicted on the Copts by the Arab Muslim rulers in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries, which were marked by coercion, fiscal pressure and the destruction of churches and which entailed a massive movement of conversion to Islam. Moreover, although Christianity is portrayed as a heavenly religion whose followers enjoy the "DHIMMI" protected status, schoolbooks propagate the view that Islam is the only true religion and that Christianity (and Judaism) are second-rate religions. The Torah and the Gospels are distorted, and their followers are portrayed as unbelievers and infidels.

There is an impressive educational effort in Egyptian schoolbooks to advocate tolerance and negate extremism on the basis of the religion of Islam. However, this attempt is not only unable to erase this perception of other religions as second rate, but rather strengthens the view that Islam, "*the only true religion*", is the alpha and omega of Egyptian national identity. The actual situation of the Copts reflects the failure of this dissonant and schizophrenic educational effort.

A year before the overthrow of the regime of Husni Mubarak, there was an attempt by this regime to address this issue and to reform the school curricula in order to direct it towards a more secular viewpoint, one which would not base national identity upon religion. Since the change of regime, the recommendations submitted by the committee to revise history textbooks do not address this issue, which is so critical for the future of Egypt and of its democratic regime.