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**Title: Evaluation paper 'Landownership disputes in Egypt - A case study of the tensions around the Monastery of Abū Fānā in May 2008' written by DEDI interns Asger Toft Johannsen, Marianne Nabil Mahrous and Maria Graversen**  
**Author: Wa'el Mohammed Hassan, Egyptian High Court lawyer**

The interns writing this case study about the conflict around the monastery of Abu Fana in May 2008 embarked on a long journey through Egyptian law to find out whether the conflict is sectarian, just a land dispute, or a combination of the two.

Since the conflict included a dispute over land, they first discussed Egyptian land registration laws and supported this with different articles from Egyptian law. The students have succeeded in presenting various Egyptian laws accurately.

The study demonstrates that Egyptian traditions of obtaining land through wad al-yad and the weak implementation of land registration laws and regulations have greatly contributed to an escalation of tensions over a number of years, ultimately resulting in the clashes of May 31, 2008.

Since the tensions were not dealt with at an early stage, land ownership issues became mixed with religious arguments. This issue was further complicated by the fact that the Christian side involves a monastery, adding strong religious feelings into the already potent mix. These religious arguments were greatly strengthened by a militant attack on an outpost of the monastery and the kidnapping of three monks who were ill-treated by Muslim villagers. Both Muslim villagers and the governor of Minia, however, denied that the conflict contained a sectarian element. Thus the debates started, often with great emotion between Muslims and Christians about whether or not the conflict was religious at its basis. Before answering this question, though, we first have to provide a definition of sectarianism.

Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS), an educational website, provides a definition of religious sectarianism that is relevant for our understanding of sectarianism in Egypt. LTS describes religious sectarianism as, “A narrow-minded following of a particular belief by members of a denomination that leads to prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, malice and ill-will towards members, or presumed members, of another denomination. Sectarianism can occur in different ways, either at an individual, group, cultural or institutional level.”<sup>1</sup> Minia Governor Ahmad Dia al-Dīn said initially he believed the conflict was sectarian.<sup>2</sup> He later said this was not the case, defining religious sectarianism more narrowly as members of a religious group seeking to convert members of the other group, but this, he said, had not happened.<sup>3</sup>

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[www.ltscotland.org.uk/antisectarian/whatIsSectarianism/aboutsectarianism/guidetosectarianism/index.asp](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/antisectarian/whatIsSectarianism/aboutsectarianism/guidetosectarianism/index.asp)

2 AWR, 2008, week 15, art. 3

3 Information provided by Cornelis Hulsman who has met the governor on several occasions.

I see the conflict around the monastery of Abu Fana as a conflict that started out as one about land ownership but ended up as a sectarian conflict.

Government authorities and the security apparatus sometimes play with sectarian incidents in order to maintain the status quo in an area and stop provocations. At the same time, Christians have developed a growing feeling of neglect and a sense of historic persecution. It is important to note, however, that the word 'persecution' differs in meaning and significance between Muslims and Christians. Muslims see persecution as any act of the government upon themselves or their property, while Christians, who grew up with stories of martyrs and historic suffering, see persecution as an act with a distinctly religious basis. What is needed is a profound change in the religious discourse so that a spirit of tolerance is promoted rather than aggressive and negative attitudes toward other religions. This is especially needed in the broad base of the middle class, among Egyptian political parties and leaders, and in international satellite channels. Christian and Muslim leaders are certainly able to contribute to solving conflicts through changing the religious discourse. Although some religious leaders have lost credibility, most Egyptian people still obey the priest of their church or the sheikh of their mosque.

In Egypt, thousands of disputes have taken place over land ownership issues. This has resulted in injuries and deaths, between Muslims and Muslims, Christians and Christians, as well as between parties that include Muslims and Christians. It is not true, though, that if a conflict involves parties from two different religions it necessarily signifies sectarian strife. People deal with injustices and are often oppressed at the same time. Many people are involved in tensions, regardless of their religion. The main problem in Egypt is not sectarian; it is the accumulation of the hardships of daily life in a developing country.

The poor conflict management of government authorities in conflicts that involve both Christians and Muslims undoubtedly has a negative effect, but Christians sometimes interpret this as Muslims mistreating Christians. The mismanagement of government, however, should not be interpreted as Islamic persecution, for many Muslims would agree that these actions are contrary to Islam. In the Hadith this is clear, for the prophet of Islam said, "Anyone who injures a non-Muslim will be considered as if he injured me, and he will be my enemy till the end of days."<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that many people analyze incidents between Muslims and Christians as sectarian, preventing them from seeing the real facts behind the incident. The fact is that Egyptians are emotional people. This affects the description of any tension that could give rise to emotions and thus adds to the problems and exasperates incidents. If both parties continue to write in this way and arouse emotions, and if the media in its coverage of events keeps using provocative head lines to increase their sales, this will create a sectarian crisis in the country. Unfortunately the seeds of this crisis have already been sown.

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4 <http://www.islamweb.net/ver2/Fatwa>ShowFatwa.php?lang=A&Id=51557&Option=FatwaId>

The question that has emerged from the report is how to determine if the incident at Abu Fana is sectarian in nature or simply a clash about land ownership. I agree with the interns that it was a clash about ownership but both sides used their own weapons. For example, Muslim villagers used arms to stop monks from enlarging their monastery and monks tried to gain sympathy from other Christian communities in countries with a Christian majority. Copts in Egypt and Christians in other Christian countries cooperated in broadcasting this conflict using modern technology such as satellite TV and the internet. Having common interests in this case, they sought the protection of the monks, the buildings of the monastery, and the rights of the Copts in Egypt. This was how a conflict over land changed into a sectarian struggle.

I believe this response to government and Muslim behavior is dangerous because it might lead to a sudden violent reaction that could spin out of control, resulting in endless sectarian fights akin to what we see in Lebanon and Iraq. Unfortunately, this is not the only incident that media outlets have highlighted. A number of land disputes involving Christians and Muslims in Egypt have ended violently, but in the Abu Fana case it is difficult to categorize it as only a sectarian incident, despite international media reports, which are quick to point out religious tensions. Nonetheless it is important to bear in mind that most land disputes in Egypt which happen to be between Muslims and Christians are not sectarian in nature.

While much of the recent violence is related to religion it is not religion that drives the violence but the fact that our religious institutions try to take advantage of a difficult situation by pushing agendas that are not appropriate. This includes the expansion of the monastery into disputed territory as well as the development of the villagers upon the archeological periphery, supposedly protected by government authorities from such infringements.

It is clear that the government failed to respond effectively both to the incidents of illegal land acquisitions and to the violence later perpetrated. It also failed to address the root causes of the controversy. This in turn has led to an increase in sectarian tensions and decreases the ability of the government to intervene out of fear for further backlashes.

The monks claim that the conflict is sectarian, while the Muslim Bedouins claim that the conflict only concerns the land. Both sides are entrenched in their positions. Looking at the claims of both parties, however, demonstrates that from the start this was a conflict over land that ended up as a sectarian conflict, showing a difference in interest. Despite the peace agreement was that was concluded concerning the land issues at Abu Fana, the legal aspects concerning the damages inflicted on people and property remain unresolved. Therefore, the question that must be posed to the government is: When will the Egyptian parliament, the Council of Consultation, the judicial system, and the executive branch enforce article 40 of the Egyptian Constitution:

All citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination between them due to race, ethnic origin, language, religion or creed?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/mideast/EG/Egyptian%20Constitution%20-%20english.pdf/view>