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Title: Media reports of Christians converting to Islam

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1. Introduction

Conflicting figures

At the end of 2006, *Al-Dustūr* wrote that Dr. Hamdī Zaqqūq, the minister of endowments, asserted at the Islamic Thought Conference that the Azhar receives almost 1000 people annually who want to convert to Islam¹. However, official Azhar statistical reports state that the actual number is only about 100 People. However, it does concede that this number has gradually been increasing over the past few years [see AWR art. 4, week 48/2006]. According to *Al-Fajr*, more than 200 cases of conversion were registered in the church in under two years [AWR, 2007, week 11, art. 57]. However *al-Dustūr* newspaper asserted in 2007 that the number of Christians converting to Islam has reached almost 5000 a year [AWR, 2007, week 14, art. 9]: according to Mamdūh Nakhlah, president of al-Kalimah Center for Human Rights this figure is possible, however, according to Father ʿAbd al-Massīh Basīt, priest of the Virgin Mary Church at Musturud and lecturer of Apologetics at the clerical college this number is exaggerated [AWR, 2007, week 14, art. 10]. What is certain is that the number of conversions taking place in Egypt is relatively high and that exact numbers are only available from the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, which does not make its information available to the public. Therefore, what Muslim thinker Muhammad ʿImārah praised as an “unprecedented phase of flourishing in Egypt’s modern history” [see AWR art. 5 and 6, week 16/2007], is a cause of increasing concern and tension in the relationship between Copts and Muslims. What these contradictory figures show is that not only is there a great deal of secrecy and ignorance regarding the number of conversions that take place every year in Egypt but also that the issue has the potential to cause friction between the different religious communities.

According to Majdī Khalīl, in *Watanī International* on November 19 2006 [AWR, 2006, week 47, art 31], “the Egyptian media used to ignore the Copts' problems and comply with the government, especially in the case of the Islamized Coptic girls. However, the increasing number of specialized Coptic Web sites and the neutrality of some Arab media, such as Īlāf, al-ʿArabīyah net and al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin [The Civilized Dialogue] shows how this phenomenon revealed the subjectivity of the Egyptian press that is dominated by the government and the majority”. As the *AWR* reviewer of the article mentioned, nothing is said about what majority is being referred to, although there are allusions made to the Muslim majority. Newspapers in Egypt are reporting more and more about cases of conversion from Christianity to Islam. The question is, how are they dealing with this phenomenon?

This paper will seek to depict how the Egyptian press has dealt with this subject in the last ten years; which cases it reported and how it covered them. The second part of the paper investigates the sources that newspapers use to write their reports. Particular focus has been put on the articles that turned an unknown name into one of public interest.

2. Media coverage

¹ According to Dr. Cornelis Hulsman, *Shaykh* Atiya Shagr , head of Fatwā Committee at Azhar, told him in 1995 about a special mosques assignment by the minister of the interior where converts can be registered: they were 1000 per year. Dr. Hulsman saw the book. When it is full, it must be given back to the minister.

The analysis in this paper is based on the Arab media covered by *Arab-West-Report* [AWR] and its predecessor *Religious News service from the Arab World* [RNSAW] since 1997², as well as stories from the Coptic *Al-Katiba al-Tibīya* [The Theban Legion]. Due to time constraints cases of reconversion, or those related to bureaucratic misunderstandings over ID cards, or foreigners who converted have not been considered in this study.

According to Cornelis Hulsman's report to the New York Council of Churches [AWR, 1999, week 26, art. 37], priests estimate that about 60 percent of people who have converted to Islam are aged 17 or 18; 80 percent to 90 percent of the converts are younger than 25 years old; 80 percent of those converts are girls. The same sources estimate that about 10 percent of the conversions to Islam in Alexandria are due to pressure at work or in the military. Another 10 percent in Alexandria do so because they want to get a divorce, while the figure is 17 percent in Cairo. Hulsman also stated in his report that 40 percent of the conversion cases he saw had family problems. When *Al-Dustūr* asked about the reasons behind this phenomenon, both the president of al-Kalimah Center, Mamdūh Nakhlah, and the clergyman Father °Abd al-Massīh Basīt stated that almost 90 percent of conversions are due to financial problems, while the rest convert either to marry a Muslim or to get a divorce [AWR, 2007, week 14, art. 10 and week 18, art. 3]. However, according to *Al-Dustūr*, security bodies say otherwise and they cite love affairs between young people as the main reason [AWR, 2007, week 14, art. 9]³.

In general, this last position seems to be supported by the Egyptian media.

2.1. Copts that have converted or allegedly converted to Islam

The issue of Christians converting to Islam does not appear to be related to belief and faith, even in the press. Every reported case appears as a forced conversion as a result of social, psychological and even physical pressures. Most of the stories published by newspapers are about girls who disappear for unknown reasons or girls who are allegedly kidnapped, manipulated, drugged and raped by Muslim men who want to Islamize and marry them or by organized gangs looking for money.

Amongst the hundreds of articles on the issue, only those related to specific people have been selected, that is to say those that include names and second names, or reported a location or a relative's details, are of Egyptian origin and who converted between 1997 and 2007 in Egypt.

129 names distributed amongst 125 articles were found in *AWR's* archive [ten of which are press reviews based on different newspaper sources], and 15 were found in *al-Kitiba Tibiya*. The focus of this investigation is to attempt to understand which stories are recorded by newspapers and how they present these issues to their audience. Articles that comment on or discuss stories if they give or add details to the conversion or alleged conversion's case already discussed by the media were also taken into consideration.

The media claims that the primary reasons for conversion are:

- forced disappearance
- broken marriage

² Media covered by RNSAW/AWR: *Al-Ahrām*, *al-Akhbār*, *al-Jumhūrīyah*, *al-Wafd*, *al-Ahrār*, *al-Hayāt*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, *al-°Arabī*, *al-Ahālī*, *°Aqīdatī*, *al-Liwā' al-Islāmī*, *al-Liwā' al-°Arabī*, *Sawt al-Azhar*, *Sawt al-Umma*, *al-Usubū'*, *al-Qāhirah*, *al-Maydān*, *Watanī*, *Rose al-Yūsuf*, *October*, *al-Musawwar*, *Ākhir Sā°ah*, *Sabāh al-Khayr*, *al-Ahrām al-°Arabī*, *al-Misrī al-Yawm*, *al-Dustūr*, *Cairo Times*, *al-Fajr*.

³ For more information about Christians converting to Islam see: "Forced conversion or not?", Report presented to the New York Council of Churches on June 28, 1999 by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 1999, week 26, art. 37; "Conversions of Christians to Islam", Special for the RNSAW by Rudolf Yanney, AWR, 2001, week 1, art. 4; "Reflections on conversion in Egypt", Special for the AWR by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 2007, week 50, art. 7.

- financial pressure
- faith

The cases belonging to the first category are the ones that are most commonly claimed by those close to the convert. Money pressures or work related issues are usually denied by converts. Faith reasons are normally a cover up for less spiritual issues, most of the time related to troubles in the family or church⁴. One article can also belong to more than one category: each text has been categorised according to the main claim.

2.1.1 Forced disappearance

Rumors tend to claim that Christians who disappear have been kidnapped and forced to convert. In general, the press records what has been said using dramatic expressions to make the most interesting article possible. They are mainly stories of girls, from the middle and lower classes. Most of them fall in love with Muslim men, something which their families do not approve of, so they run away and convert to Islam in order to escape their family's control. To conceal their shame, these families announce that their relatives have been threatened, blackmailed, raped or kidnapped by a Muslim person or group. They go to the security department and file a report [AWR, 2007, week 50, art. 7 and AWR, 1999, week 26, art. 37]. As *Watani* wrote “The disappearance of minor Christian girls continues. More and more of these types of stories are circulating, characterized only by differences in personalities and places”⁵.

A total of 108 different names of people who were or are allegedly kidnapped were found. Four of them were men, the oldest 51 years old. Five were referred to as married women aged between 21 and 38 years old. At least 47 were girls who were declared underage [under 18 years old as stated by the law⁶] when they disappeared, that is to say they were not legally old enough to convert and get married; in one case the girl was claimed to be 12 years old, in another one 13, the others range from 14 up to 17 years old. The other 52 cases are names of young women, aged between 18 and 26, at least four of whom were already engaged.⁷

As for the claimed procedure and circumstances of the kidnapping, 18 cases denounce the conspiracy theory regarding the collusion of the police and the kidnapper⁷; at least eight cases concern phone contact between the family of the alleged kidnapper and the person who has been kidnapped⁸; five cases are about the attempt to steal money or property from the victims' families⁹, while in one case, reported by five different newspaper sources, the girl was forced to convert with money¹⁰; seven cases concerned claims about groups of different sorts of kidnappers [Islamic or prostitution gangs, that steal human organs or that manipulate girls in chat rooms]¹¹, five cases

⁴ AWR, 2005, week 17, art. 20

⁵ AWR, 2007, week 31, art. 24.

⁶ Until 1996 the legal minimum age for conversion was 16. This was changed to 18. Item 2 of civil law no. 12, 1996, specifies that the mature age for a child is 18 years of age, and that in turn this is the legal age for conversions of both boys and girls. The same law sets the legal age for marriage to be 18.

⁷ AWR, 2006, week 5, art. 38; week 10, art. 57; 2007, week 35, art. 18; al-Katiba Tibiya 03/2006 (2 articles).

⁷ AWR, 2005, week 50, art. 17; 2006, week 11, art. 7; week 19, art. 5; week 26, art. 2; week 41, art. 60; week 41, art. 95; week 45, art. 51; 2007, week 1, art. 39; week 31, art. 24; week 40, art. 14; week 42, art. 17; week 42, art. 18; week 44, art. 20; al-Katiba Tibiya 2/2005, 3/2005, 5/2005, 3/2006, 6/2006.

⁸ AWR; 2006, week 30, art. 23; 2006, week 41, art. 59; 2006, week 43, art. 32; 2006, week 46, art. 40; 2007, week 33, art. 6 and 19; 2007, week 34, art. 6; 2007, week 35, art. 18; 2007, week 42, art. 17.

⁹ AWR, 2006, week 18, art. 7; 2006, week 37, art. 42; 2006, week 42, art. 58; 2006, week 43, art. 31 and 32; 2007, week 15, art. 3; 2007, week 34, art. 5. al-Kitiba Tibiya 04/2005.

¹⁰ AWR, week 24, art. 10;

¹¹ AWR, 2006, week 19, art. 5; 2006, week 41, art. 53 and 95; 2006, week 46, art. 40; 2007, week 3, art. 48. al-Kitiba Tibiya 6/2006 and 10/2006.

mentioned mental or psychological disease of the victims¹², four girls were allegedly drugged¹³, two girls were sexual abused¹⁴, two girls were brainwashed¹⁵, and one describes dreams and visions she had before converting¹⁶.

According to the table below, the media coverage over this issue has increased considerably since 2005. No identifiable forced disappearances were reported in the Egyptian media in 1997. In 1998 in the article 'It's a family affaire' by *Cairo Times*, there is a clear reference to Teresa Shaker's case, the 14-year-old girl who was murdered along with her father, mother, brother and sister in the Beni Suef governorate of Wafa in November 1997, although her name is not mentioned [AWR, 1998, week 14, art 12]¹⁷. The weekly *Rose al-Yūsuf* published the first list of girls that had allegedly been kidnapped, publishing the text of an advertisement in the *Washington Times* from May 25, 1999 claiming Christian girls in Egypt are forced to convert to Islam. The main purpose of the article was not to spread rumors, but to prove that they were wrong with an investigation, albeit a weak one, where Teresa Shaker's case is mentioned again [AWR, 1999, week 23, art. 12 and week 24, art. 10]. Egyptian independent weeklies seem to have become the publications that are most interested in the issue; the Coptic *Watani* and *al-Kitiba Tibiya* also report the stories, but for different reasons. The semi-governmental dailies tend to not discuss the issue.

Table 1 – Newspapers' coverage per publication on forced disappearance's cases

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
al-Ahrām					1			1			2
al-Ahrām al- ^c Arabī											
al-Ahrār					1			1			2
al-Akhabār					1			1		1	3
al- ^c Arabī							1		1		2
al-Dustūr										15	15
al-Fajr									11	2	13
al-Hayāh								2			2
al-Jumhuriyah					4			2			6
al-Kitiba Tabiya								4	8	2	14
al-Maydān							1	8	3		12
al-Misrī al-Yawm										12	12
al-Musawwar							1		2		3
al-Qāhirah											
al-Sharq al-Awsat								1	1		2
al-Usbū ^c							2	8	4	1	15
al-Wafd								1			1
Cairo Times		(1)*									
October								1			1
Rose al-Yūsuf			2		1			1	7		11
Sawt al-Ummah					1			5	8	3	17
Watani							1	1	3	11	16
Watani International								2	7	3	12
			2		9		6	39	55	50	161

*Teresa Sakher's case. Her name is not mentioned, but the reference is clear. Her case was the first publicly discussed by media covered by AWR since 1997.

2.1.2 Broken marriages:

¹² AWR, 2006, week 14, art. 18; 2006, week 45, art. 51; 2007, week 27, art. 36. al-Kitiba Tibiya 03/2005 and 04/2005.

¹³ AWR, 2005, week 53, art. 3; 2006, week 5, art. 38; 2006, week 41, art. 53; 2007, week 7, art. 4.

¹⁴ AWR, 2006, week 5, art. 38; 2007, week 27, art. 36.

¹⁵ AWR, 2005, week 33, art. 94; 2006, week 19, art. 5.

¹⁶ AWR, 2006, week 2, art. 4.

¹⁷ For more information about that, see: "Escaping social control in Egypt dubbed kidnapping in US", Middle East Times, by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 1999, week 26, art. 36, and "Forced conversion or not?", Report presented to the New York Council of Churches on June 28, 1999 by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 1999, week 26, art. 37.

These stories are much less numerous than the ones in the previous category. In the *AWR* archive there are four cases with an identifiable convert, one reported by *Rose al-Yūsuf* in 2006 and the others by *Sawt al-Ummah* in 2006. They all are related to attempts to run away, although nobody was kidnapped¹⁸. The individual's domestic troubles with their partner are not investigated; they are reported only if the convert or alleged convert discusses them. It is commonly known that a married person must convert in order to marry again, but in these cases this message is not made very clear.

The articles in this category do not present conversion as a way to divorce or to get married, unless the source claims that somebody wants to damage the convert's or alleged convert's reputation. This was the case with Nājih Ata Farīd, who according to the girl's father, allegedly converted to take his cousin as second wife [AWR, 2006, week 18, art. 7], and to Lubná Awad, who was allegedly accused of converting to Islam and marrying a Muslim by her husband in order to obtain a document from the church so that he could marry again [AWR, 2007, week 19, art. 52]¹⁹.

When the converts are the article's source, the break-up of the marriage tends to become an accidental consequence of the conversion and religious reasons emerge. An example of this can be seen in the case of Āyidah Fāyiz, 36 years old, whereby divorce is described as a natural event due to the religious differences [AWR, 2006, week 45, art. 53]. And in the case of Hamīd Maqṣūd, 23 years old: her conversion was due to family abuse and was a way to start a new life, leaving her husband and spreading the word of Islam with her father in Syria [AWR, 2006, week 49, art. 44].

Other cases refer to divorce and the custody of children involved, as reported by eight newspapers in 21 texts. The break-up and differences of faith between the parents leads to a complicated and often difficult discussion over which religion the underage children should belong to. Two of these stories became public because they resulted in a tragedy [AWR, 2005, week 1, art. 3; 2006, week 6, art. 6], the other two because of legal statements about the children's religion [AWR, 2006, week 14, art. 35; 2007, week 30, art. 7].

These last cases were the ones that received the most press coverage, especially from the Christian *Watani*, which had been silent until now. In particular, the story of Midhat Ramsīs' sons, Mario and Andrew, and the disputed conversion of their father grabbed the media's attention for more than a year. This case came into the limelight when *Rose al-Yūsuf* published an article entitled, 'Church rejects court ruling switching custody of children from Christian mother to Muslim father' on March 29, 2006 [AWR 2006, week 14, art. 35]. At least 15 articles concerning the legal debate and ruling followed. The last was an article that appeared in September 2007, 'Stay of execution of the custody sentence' by *Watani*: the Supreme Appeal Court of Family Affairs in Alexandria announced a ruling to uphold the previous ruling that gave Mario and Andrew's father custody rights. The ruling was valid until a final decision was reached about the credibility of the father's conversion. If it is proven that the father fluctuated between Islam and Christianity he will not be given custody rights [AWR, 2007 week 39, art. 52].

¹⁸ Of course married women who were claimed to be kidnapped were probably suffering from marriage problems. Anyway that particular was secondary to their disappearance for the press as well (see the category previously described). In two cases newspapers' discussion switched their focus towards the marriage issue: that happen with Wafā' Ra'fat Adli', who was accused of bigamy in March 2006 [AWR, 2006, week 11, art. 7], and mainly with Wafā Constantine, the priest's wife that attempted to convert in December 2004 (see next chapter). Another broken marriage was briefly touch by press, that about Mari Abd al-Allāh, another priest's wife that wanted to convert in December 2004 following the Wafā's attempt: her story was not reported, but she became argument of discussion as in "Did the Church order Wafā' and Mari to be sent abroad?", *al-Usbūc*, 7th February 2005 [AWR, 2005, week 6, art. 2], "A lachrymose farce", *al-Usbūc* 13th March 2005 [AWR, week 11, art. 13], "Aren't the Muslim Brothers Egyptian citizens?", *al-Usbūc* 28th November 2005 [AWR, 2005, week 48, art. 39].

¹⁹ Articles with not mentioned people more openly report conversion as attempt in order to divorce or to get marry again, as in the bizarre "A man converts to another religion to run away from his ugly wife" [AWR, 2006, week 39, art. 3] or "A Christian wife argues to revoke the verdict of her divorce ruling because her husband, who converted to Islam in order to divorce her, is still attending Christian church services" [2007, week 30, art. 26].

None of the above mentioned cases were discussed by *al-Kitiba Tibiya*, instead it focused on other stories. In May 2005, it reported: “A wife marries a Muslim gathering two husbands, helped along by the police” [03/2005]. This is a reference to Wafā’ Ra’fat Adli’s case, previously announced as a kidnapping case by *al-Hayah*, *al-Uṣbūc* and *Al-Maydān* between March and April 2005, although contradictory reported sources claimed that she eloped with a Muslim, leaving her husband [AWR, 2005, week 16, art. 25]. Moreover, a month later her name appeared in a text about the abduction, rape and forced conversion to Islam of Christian girls, that *Al-Maydān* received from the Coptic Web site www.coptichistory.org [AWR, 2005, week 53, art. 6 and week 2, art. 4]. However, for *al-Kitiba Tibiya* the allegation of bigamy was more important than the one of kidnapping²⁰.

2.1.3 Financial pressure

There are at least two articles in the AWR archive related to financial pressure. The first one is reported by *Sawt al-Ummah* and is a case related to converts denying the allegations of the bishop of Naj° Hammadī in Upper Egypt who denounced claims about the poor financial condition of some Christian youth being exploited to force them to convert to Islam [“Bishop of Naj Hammadī accuses security forces of complying with a Muslim man who leads an organization to oblige poor Christians to convert to Islam; The accused man [Ramānī Tādris and Imād Jād Gabriel] asserts that the bishop is lying” [AWR. 2007, week 1, art. 39]]. In the other article, from *al-Kitiba Tibiya*, the convert Fadi Nabil Qultah is defined as mentally diseased [“A psychologically diseased university student forced to convert or pay a ransom of 300,000 EgP” [*al-Kitiba Tibiya*, 03/2005]]²¹.

Moreover, there is a kidnapping case that could belong to this category as well [AWR, 2004, week 50, art. 19]. In this case the allegation also came from a clergyman: in the Sunday sermon, Father Abanoud denounced the fact that Karima [14 years old] had been forced to convert to Islam after she was tempted with money and Muhammad Abdel Mohsen, the secretary of the National Democratic Party, was colluded. However both Mohsen and the girl's father denied these allegations.

2.1.4 Faith

Articles reporting cases where faith is the reason for conversion are rare. The few of them that were found in the AWR archive were from the perspective of the converts, for example in the two cases previously described, the one of Āyidah Fāyiz [AWR, 2006, week 45, art. 53] and of Hamīd Maqsūd [AWR, 2006, week 49, art. 44], which are both also stories of broken marriage as well²².

One case where the religious element is absolute and where no more details about further reasons are added is one reported by *Al-Maydān* in 2005; “The joy of the Eid with Liza” [AWR, 2005, week 5, art. 2]. The article carefully describes the commotion of the 53-year-old Liza Yūsuf Rizq, in contemplating her new world in the wake of the new religion, and the gathering of guests,

²⁰ It is surprising that *al-Kitiba Tibiya*, usually so lavish in spreading story of Christians forced to convert, does not do the same as in Wafā’ Ra’fat Adli’s case. Maybe because its article came later than the ones published by the other Egyptian media. Anyway in Wafā’ Ra’fat Adli’s case the immorality first of all, and collusion of police brought out the conversion.

²¹ Under this category articles about persecution at work have not been considered because none of the involved person was consider alleged converted. That is to say Awātif Rushdī al-Sabakhrin’s case, reported by *Sawt al-Ummah* without further investigation (“A Muslim lawyer *attempts* to force his Coptic client to convert to Islam, by *Sawt al-Ummah*, AWR, 2007, week 3, art. 23), and George Adly’s case that denounced persecution in order to return the work (*Rose al-Yūsuf* confuted his theory publishing “A disaster that tarnishes the reputation of Egypt” [AWR, 1997, week 43, art. 1]). For more information about this last episode see “Outline and Evaluation of Rick Joyner's book ‘*The Harvest*’”, Special for RNSAW, by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 1999, week 34, art. 34.

²² See previous paragraph for more information on this case.

neighbours and well-wishers from nearby villages that came to greet her. She converted with her five children, one of whom said that being part of “a religion that I and my family regretted so much not having been born in” was a new feeling. The author, ^cAbd al-Rashīd Mutāwī^c (probably Muslim), writes that Rizq announced her conversion on January 20, 2005, but does not add information about the woman's family and background and does not even mention where the woman lives or comes from. So, questions remain unknown: who is she, what does she do, why is her husband not mentioned, and most interestingly: why did she convert?²³

2.1.5 Other

There are six articles that do not fit into the above mentioned categories, all of them reported by *Sawt al-Ummah*. They do not focus on marriage problems nor on the reasons of conversion, nor are they related to alleged kidnapping. Mainly males, these converts are usually involved in bureaucratic problems related to being officially recognized as Muslim [Zaghlūl ^cAbd al-Shahīd and Hani Faraj Zaki], “The Ministry of the Interior does not acknowledge the conversion of Copts to Islam, despite the Azhar's consent”, [AWR, 2005, week 29, art. 5, and “New law forces the Ministry of Interior to acknowledge Copts conversion to Islam, which was stopped after the Wafā’ Constantine incident”, AWR, 2006, week 18, art. 6] or victims of sectarian strife, psychological pressure from the church or problems in their own family [“Aidah converted secretly, and was then subject to psychological pressure from her husband’s family and church”, AWR, 2006, week 49, art. 45]; “Christian [Imād Isa Jirjis] seeks top security agency's help to complete the procedures to convert to Islam”, [AWR, 2005, week 37, art. 24]; Copts abduct a Christian young man [Yūsuf Fathī Ni^cnā] after he embraced Islam. Security forces impose curfew on Assiut’s village of Bahīj, AWR, week 41, art. 61; “A Christian from Minia converts to Islam before disappearing [Sami’īl Māhir]... state security demanded that another Christian [Yūsuf Muhammad Abū al-Futh] avoid any village inhabited by Copts for fear of igniting sectarian sedition”, [AWR, 2007, week 2, art. 4].

2.2. When Christians converting to Islam become news

As the following table shows, media coverage on reporting conversions from Christianity to Islam has increased significantly since 2005.

Table 2 – Newspapers’ coverage per publication on conversion’s cases

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
al-Ahrām					1			1			2
al-Ahrām al- ^c Arabī											
al-Ahrār					1			1			2
al-Akhhbār					1			1		1	3
al- ^c Arabī							1		1		2

²³ By the same author is another case, always published on Al-Maydān: “Blaze of fresh sedition about to erupt in al-Sharqīya” [AWR, 2005, week 17, art. 20]. It an interview with 51-year-old Sami on April 17, 2005 at his place, allegedly kidnapped. As the convert stated, he voluntary changed religion, but the reasons still are not clarify. Anyway, in this case the author asked whether he had differences with the church that prompted him to convert and Sami replied he had many. Then add some details about the convert: he has a 15-year-old son named Rāmī and his wife quitted him in the third year of their marriage, adding he tried to work things out or resort to divorce through the church but all his efforts went down the drain.

al-Dustūr										17	17
al-Fajr									14	3	17
al-Hayāh								2			2
al-Jumhūriyah				4				2			6
al-Kitiba Tabiya								5	8	2	15
al-Maydān				1		1		8	3		13
al-Misrī al-Yawm										12	12
al-Musawwar							1		2		3
al-Qāhirah										1	1
al-Sharq al-Awsat								1	1		2
al-Usbū ^c							2	10	5	1	18
al-Wafd								1			1
Cairo Times		(1)*									
October								1			1
Rose al-Yūsuf			2		1			1	9	1	14
Sawt al-Ummah				1				8	14	7	30
Watanī							1	1	3	14	19
Watanī International								2	7	5	14
			2		10		6	45	67	64	194

In 2004 an incident took place that marked a significant turning point in the situation; Wafā' Costantine. There are at least 55 texts in the *AWR* archive that mention her name, five of which are press reviews that include around 40 articles published by thirteen different newspaper sources, between 2004 and 2007. The case of the Coptic priest's wife that was allegedly forced to convert to Islam, then returned to Christianity sparked a wide range of complicated issues. [AWR, 2004, week 51, art. 13] These issues included; sectarian strife in Egypt, Coptic divorce, and people converting to Islam as reported by the media. Since then, stories about Christians changing religion have become stories of public interest. This is especially true of the ones related to disappearances that have been openly announced, whether they are true or not.

In the following table the articles that reported information about Wafa' Costantine's case have been compiled.

Table 3 – Newspapers' coverage per publication on conversion's cases plus Wafa' Constantine's issue (The added articles concern report and discussion over Constantine's facts, not the ones about the innumerable files that her case opened)

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
al-Ahrām					1		+3	1			2 + 3
al-Ahrām al- ^c Arabī								+1			+1
al-Ahrār					1			1			2
al-Akhbār					1		+1	1		1	3 + 1
al- ^c Arabī							1 + 1		1		2 + 1
al-Dustūr										17	17
al-Fajr									14 + 1	3	17 + 1
al-Hayāh							+3	2			2 + 3
al-Jumhūriyah				4				2			6
al-Kitiba Tabiya								5	8	2	15
al-Maydān					1		1 + 1	8 + 1	3		13 + 2
al-Misrī al-Yawm										12	12
al-Musawwar							1 + 1		2		3 + 1
al-Qāhirah										1	1
al-Sharq al-Awsat							+6	1	1		2 + 6
al-Usbū ^c							2 + 1	10 + 4	5	1	18 + 5
al-Wafd							+1	1 + 1			1 + 2
Cairo Times		(1)*									
October								1			1
Rose al-Yūsuf			2		1		+1	1	9	1	14 + 1
Sawt al-Ummah					1		+1	8 + 2	14	7	30 + 3
Watanī							1 + 1	1 + 1	3	14	19 + 2
Watanī International							+2	2 + 1	7	5	14 + 3
			2		10		6 + 23	45 + 11	67 + 1	64	194 + 35

The main case discussed by newspapers between 1997 and 2004 was the disappearance of four high school girls in 2001 who were around 14 and 15 years old. A full page was devoted to the story in *al-Jumhūrīyah* on May 15, 2001 [AWR, 2001, week 20, art.21], based on reports from eye witnesses, security investigations, schoolteachers, classmates and the Bishop of Minya and Mallawi. The report stated that they ran away on May 2 from Mallawi to Cairo. According to Drs. Hulsman, “It was a highly unusual story. Girls from Upper Egypt, a very traditional society, do not just run away. Also unusual was the size of the article in *al-Jumhūrīyah*. Why did they turn it into such a big story?” [“Kidnap or not? Conflicting testimonies”, by Cornelis Hulsman, AWR, 2001, week 26, art 26].

On May 23 and 24 *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Akhbar* and *al-Jumhūrīyah* reported that the four girls had returned home [AWR, 2001, week 21, art. 15-17]. In the following days, other articles analysing and criticizing the social rebellion of the young girls appeared [*Al-Ahram*, *al-Jumhūrīyah*]. *Rose-al-Yūsuf* asked a politics professor, Ahmad Yūsuf, about the phenomena of young girls running away. Another weekly, *Sawt al-Ummah*, praised the happy ending to the Mallawi girls' story and revealed how the police managed to find them [AWR, 2001, week 22, art.19]. Rumors claimed that the girls were kidnapped and raped by Muslim extremist groups in order to force them to convert to Islam but the reality seems to have been quite different.

Official daily newspapers that usually do not cover such stories also took an interest in this story of the four girls. Only two magazines reported the story of the four girls, but when the mystery was already solved; the independent magazine published a more detailed account.

Wafā' Costantine's case attracted the attention of most newspapers, most prominently in the non-Egyptian dailies *Al-Hayah* and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. Moreover, her story became more well-known because almost simultaneously another priest's wife attempted to convert; Mary °Abd Allāh's story was hardly covered by the media at all which seemed to focus on the story of Wafā'. Newspapers covered the story but did not discuss what she represented and still represents in Egyptian society. The following examples highlight the different effects that the conversion issue has had:

3. Effects of the conversion issue

3.1 The psychology of people who convert

- “Christian girls who convert to Islam deny allegations they were kidnapped”: “We have converted to Islam of our own free will. We will never leave our husbands and children. I appeal to the president not to hand us over to the church” a not so subtle reference to Wafā' Costantine, according to AWR editor [AWR, 2006, week 1, art. 2]
- “Three priests detained Aidah, who converted to Islam, for 48 hours in a church for advice and guidance”: “The life of Aidah, a 36-year-old Christian, was turned upside down when her family and husband learned that she had secretly converted to Islam and when her fears of being kidnapped and forced to abandon Islam like Wafā' Costantine came true” [AWR, 2006, week 49, art. 45]
- “Mariam asks President Mubārak to protect her”: “She [Marian Majdī al-Jūnī] also promises to attend the Coptic Orthodox Church meetings of advice and guidance provided that she will not be forced to return to the church like Wafā' Costantine” [AWR, 2007, week 12, art. 5]

3.2 Reporting and analysing fact

- “Sectarian strife flares up in Fayyūm”, about alleged conversion of Marya Makran/Milad and Teresa Ayyad: “These incidents bring us back to Wafā' Costantine's issue that raised heated controversy three months ago” [AWR, 2005, week 10, art. 11]

- "A lachrymose farce", still about alleged conversion of Marya Makran/Milad and Teresa Ayyad: "The story is yet another rehash of the stories of Wafā' Costantine and Mary Abd Allāh, which gripped the nation since their occurrence in December 2005" [AWR, 2005, week 11, art. 13]
- "Coptic family kidnaps Amīra from her husband's house": "That conversion took place a year ago, before state sovereignty became weak in the aftermath of the Wafā' Costantine issue" [AWR, 2005 week 11, art. 16]
- "The Coptic file": "The scenes of massive Coptic outrage expressed in Cairo last December in reaction to the questionable conversion to Islam by Wafā' Costantine, the priest's wife and again last month in al-Fayyūm to protest the dubious conversion of two medical students, require the utmost courage and open mindedness" [AWR, 2005, week 11, art. 20]
- "Blaze of fresh sedition about to erupt in al-Sharqīya": "Another fit of anger is gripping the al-Malāk Church, some 80 kilometers from the city of al-Zaqāzīq, in al-Sharqīya governorate, after Samī Zakī Awad, Ilyās Abu Rāmī, was reportedly kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam by the security authorities, in exactly the same fashion as the groundless news reports that preceded the Wafā' Costantine commotion" [AWR, week 17, art. 20]

3.3 Discussion about the conversion issue

- "Did the church order Wafa' and Mari to be sent abroad?" [AWR, 2005, week 6, art. 2]
- "Aren't the Muslim Brothers Egyptian citizens?", in which Dr. Muhammad Salīm al-Awwā writes about the illegality of handing over two recently converted Muslims, Wafā' Constantine and Mary Abd Allāh, to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Dr. al-Awwā argues that in handing over the two women, the state demonstrated submission to the church's demands [AWR, 2005, week 48, art. 39]
- "A significant year in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church": "Wafā' Costantine [Reviewer: the wife of a Coptic priest allegedly abducted and forced to convert to Islam], Kristīn Nādir Kamāl and Māryān Nādir Kamāl are the most famous cases" [AWR, 2006, week 37, art. 61]

3.4 Citizens' right to choose their religious belief according to article 46 of the Cnstitution

- "The Ministry of the Interior does not acknowledge the conversion of Copts to Islam, despite the Azhar's consent": "An Administrative Court decision has granted Copts who convert to Islam the right to return to Christianity whenever they wish. This has led to the Ministry of Interior refusing to acknowledge such conversions to Islam. As a result Copts who have converted to Islam have begun bringing suits against the Minister of the Interior and the Administration for Civil Affairs director for obstructing the completion of their conversion procedures and refusing to change the name and religion entries on their ID cards". The author argues that the government wanted to close the matter of the conversion of Wafa' Costantine to Islam as quickly as possible without considering the possible repercussions that could affect citizens' right to choose their religion, as was the case with Hani Faraj Zaki, Zaghālūl °Abd al-Shahīd [AWR, 2005, week 29, art.5]
- "New law forces the Ministry of Interior to acknowledge the conversion to Islam of Copts, which was stopped after the Wafā' Constantine incident": "A new law²⁴ has forced Habīb al-°Adlī to acknowledge the conversion of Orthodox Copts to Islam. Despite the Azhar accepting the person's conversion, the ministry refused to write the new religious information in personal identity cards in order to avoid any clashes with Pope Shenouda and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The court has decided to apply this law to Zaghālūl °Abd al-Shahīd Nashid, for legal reasons, that depend on clause no. 40 of the Egyptian Constitution that demand equality amongst citizens in terms of rights and public duties." [AWR, 2006, week 18, art. 6]
- "Administrative Court rejects the law-suit promoted by Yūsuf al-Badrī in the issue of Wafā' Costantine", the Administrative Court rejected the lawsuit promoted by *Shaykh* Yūsuf al-Badri, an Islamist known for bringing various cases he believes to be in violation of Islam before the court, to

arraign Wafā' Costantine and ask her before the court what doctrine she has adopted [AWR, week 17, art. 3]

4. Forced conversion, a question of perspective

As already discussed, the cases of alleged forced disappearances are those that are recorded in the Egyptian media. In theory they can all be divided into three categories:

- The first article mentions the disappearance in the media [sometimes this is the only article]
- Further articles discuss the person who has disappeared, reporting about developments or repeating the same claims
- discussions following the alleged disappearances [13 articles, mainly published by *Watanī International* (three)²⁵ and *Watanī* (three)²⁶.]

Names run from one article to another, whether it is a report, investigation, or comment. The same story of the same kidnapped girl can be read in the news days, weeks and even months after the first article. In the three years, since Wafa Costantine's case hit the headlines [December 2004], at least 83 articles from the Egyptian press covered by *AWR* denounced the disappearance of people, most of them citing the report filed by the family to the security department. But how did the newspapers get information about these stories?

The stories come into the public sphere in different ways. These methods can be divided into five main groups:

- Coptic or/and human right association's interference
- Demonstrations and legal actions
- Sectarian incidents
- Investigations over rumors or disclosure of truth
- The alleged victim speaking out against their family's claims

For each of the above categories, articles were selected that were useful for analyzing the sources that newspapers use to get information and edit their text. With the exception of a reference to a list of names published in 1999, they all report stories that followed the Mallawi girls' and Costantine's case.

4.1 Coptic or/and human right association's interference

Newspapers that usually spread texts or appeals from Coptic or human rights associations do not mention any specifics regarding the figure presented, although they are prone to exaggerations. Moreover, they do not investigate the cases; if they do, there is a scant lack of sources used. It is interesting to note the differences in the way that newspapers and journalists cope with this problem.

- In 1999 *Rose al-Yūsuf* featured the full text advertised in the *Washington Times* of May 25 claiming Christian girls in Egypt are kidnapped, raped and forced to convert to Islam. Ten underage girls are mentioned. The author Muhammad 'Abd al-Mūnim concluded the translation with a paragraph that says "We investigated and we found that all these stories are groundless, they are mere slanders", without details. One week later, another article followed, entitled 'The love affairs

²⁵ AWR, 2005, week 11, art. 20; 2006, week 47, art. 31; 2007, week 36, art. 48; 2007, week 43, art. 51.

²⁶ AWR, 2006, week 5, art. 37 and 40; 2007, week 10, art. 2.

are not religious persecution.”. The five reported stories of the so called “heroines” are briefly described but there is a lack of source information [AWR, 1999, week 23, art. 12 and week 24, art. 10].

- On March 31, 2005, *Al-Maydān* published “Emigrant Coptic Orthodox community calls on the Christians of Egypt to revolt for Nivīn”, an appeal from the Emigrant Copts association’s Internet Web site. That incited the Copts of Egypt to demonstrate in every possible peaceful way for the 19-year-old Christian girl Nivīn Māhir, another forced convert to Islam: hunger strikes, marching in protests in front of international organizations, the Republican Palace, the *Shurá* Council, or even filing complaints to International Human Rights organizations. Then follow the story of the girl, according to the association, without reporting further investigation or analysis [AWR, 2005, week 14 art. 31].

-A few months later, on December 29 2005, the magazine published “Four Christian girls missing”. The four reports on alleged kidnappings were “received on Friday” by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights [www.eohr.org/]. The reference to Friday shows the willingness to update the Coptic files. Details were mainly given about those who filed each report [the girl’s father in three cases, the girl’s brother in the other ones], and the day of the disappearance [AWR, 2005, week 53, art.4].

-On the same page another text was published, entitled “More than 50 abduction cases: Coptic encyclopedia claims Christian girls abducted, forced to convert to Islam”. The encyclopedia mentioned many incidents of abduction. Ten names were reported with no more details but that two are underage. No information was mentioned even about Īzzat Andarāwus, the author of the manual. It was given one week later, on January 5, 2006, when the same newspaper came out with “Former Christians say they converted to Islam out of their will, dismiss kidnapping reports”. Two girls, Wafā’ Ra’fat Adli and Ivon Wahba Mīkhā’īl, visited the paper’s offices to tell their conversion story; they denied what was mentioned about them in the text that the magazine took from the Coptic Web site, www.coptichistory.org, the site owned by the Copt called Izzat Andrāws [AWR, 2005, week 53, art. 6 and 2006, week 2, art. 4].

- On February 2, 2006, *Al-Fajr* published “Teresa, Yāsmīn top the list: More Christian girls reported missing” [AWR, 2006, week 6, art. 7]. Three names are given: Teresa Ghattās Kāmil Girgis, Yāsmīn Mūsa Tādrous, Fātin Fāris Adlī. Only the first one is investigated through the detailed testimony of her older bother Said: he himself informed the police about the disappearance of his 19-year-old sister, accusing villager Mutazz Muhammad Mutwallī of kidnapping her; no more sources are presented. No information is mentioned about where “the list of Christian girls who have recently disappeared” comes from.

- On October 8, 2006, Nādir Shukrī, stimulated by the dramatic story of the 17-year-old Lorance Wajīh ‘Imīl, who managed to escape from her kidnappers, inquired in *Watanī*: “Was Lorance one in a series of what Copts claim are abductions of their daughters and following forced conversion to Islam?”. 12 female names about whom “nothing has been heard” followed: each of them has a location reference, but eight of them lack a second name or further details about their identity. All but one of them are said to be underage [AWR, 2006, week 41, art. 59]. The same list of names [plus one more added] was also published on December 31 [AWR, 2006, week 53, art. 33]. On November 19 another similar list of ten names was published in the same newspaper, the newspaper again mentioned the conversions and those who are missing [AWR, 2006, week 47, art. 31].

-On July 29 2007, another case was published, entitled 'The file of Coptic teen girls is still open'. It is an emotional story about the disappearance of Engy Atif Kamil, aged 17, and her father's efforts

to find her. He accused Abbas of kidnapping his daughter. *Watani* consulted Chancellor Najīb Jibra'il, speaker of the Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organization about the case.

- On November 2006 *al-Kitiba Tibiya* briefly reported the case of Mirna Thabet Fahmy from Alexandria: "Press release from al-Kalama Center: a girl kidnapped from Alexandria". No further details are given [*al-Kitiba Tibiya* 11/2006].

- On October 8 2007, *Al-Dustūr* published 'A new disappearance case of a young Christian girl from Beni Suef and the American Coptic Union claims that the number of girls kidnapped reached half a million'. Blaming security officers for their lack of interest in the case of 18-year-old Theresa Awad, who disappeared in Beni Suef under mysterious circumstances, the American Coptic Union [See: www.copts4freedom.com/] issued a statement expressing its regret with the continuing phenomenon of the disappearance of Christian girls, claiming that half a million girls were kidnapped in Egypt. The union asserted that it would ask the U.S. administration to implement the recommendations suggested by the annual U.S. International Religious Freedom Report for 2007²⁷ [AWR, 2007, week 40, art. 14].

4.2 Demonstrations and legal actions

The family can attract media and the public's attention not just by filing the report of the kidnapping to the security department, but by claiming and demonstrating, sending faxes and telegraphs to presidents, human rights organizations and media. This is precisely what Amal Zakī Nasīm's family did²⁸. Their 18-year-old daughter who disappeared on July 12, 2007, reached the attention of three different newspapers. There was a total of 22 articles over the course of a four month period, starting at the end of August 2007 with six publications by *al-Misrī al-Yawm* and three by *al-Dustūr*, and concluding with 'State Security threatens the father of the disappeared girl from Mahallah with detention unless he stops reporting to the media', *al-Dustūr*, November 3, 2007 [AWR, 2007, week 44, art. 20]²⁹.

Sometimes, if there is more than one newspaper reporting the news, the case is based on different sources, otherwise the family's perspective remains predominant³⁰. Families of the kidnapped girls usually announce the name of the alleged kidnapper. No newspaper article in the database ever interviewed the defendants.

- "A Copt accuses the *grand imām* of the Azhar of luring his daughter to convert to Islam" [AWR, 2005, week 14, art. 18] by *Sawt al-Ummah* April 4, 2005. The case of Ingy Nagy Edward, 17 years old, become known nationwide thanks to her father's attempts to bring her back home. The author only reported the family's perspective, without doing any investigative work³¹.

- "Copts protest in monastery over another Coptic woman's disappearance" [AWR, 2005, week 16, art. 25] is the *AWR* press review based on *al-Hayah* of March 13, *al-Usbūc* of April 18 and *Al-Maydān* of April 14, 2005, about Wafā' Ra'fat Adli's alleged kidnapping. The recorded sources are not defined and include security and Egyptian church officials who asserted she had eloped with a

²⁷ For more information on the report see: AWR, 2007, week 37, art. 5; and week 38, art. 6.

²⁸ "Zakī Nasīm, Amal's father, and the church informed the police, the State Security Apparatus, the presidency of the republic, the People's Assembly, and the Council of Ministers about the disappearance, accusing one of her friends who wears a niqāb of abducting her" [AWR, 2007, week 33, art. 6].

²⁹ AWR, 2007, week 33, art. 6; week 34, art. 6; week 35, art. 18; week 37, art. 26; week 42, art. 18; week 44, art. 20.

³⁰ Sāra Subhī's case is another example of how claims can be spread by press in different days without any change of perspective. Her disappearance (on 9th June) was reported by three different newspapers almost in the same way in less than twenty days: "Love story causes demonstrations" *Al-Fajr* 24th July [AWR, 2006, week 30, art. 23], "Protests against Pope Shenouda" *Al-Maydān* 2nd August 2006 [AWR, 2007, week 32, art. 16] and "Family of eight absent girls head for presidency to find their daughters" *Sawt al-Ummah* [2006, AWR, week 32, art. 17].

³¹ For background see AWR, 2004, week 28, art. 37,38; and AWR, 2004, week 36, art. 28.

Muslim man leaving her husband, an interior ministry official with no comment, and Father Augustinus of Mar Mina Church in Hilwān and the father of the 21-year-old missing woman who said she stated she was not kidnapped before the police and called for having her handed over to the church for "religious advising" sessions before she made her final decision about converting.

- 'Stickers to find abducted Christian girls' [AWR, 2005, week 50, art. 17], by *Sawt al-Ummah* of December 12, 2005, describe the expedience brought out from an old woman in order to find her two underage daughters, Marian and Christine Nādir Kamāl. "The woman spoke about the story", according to the newspapers, but no details are given.

- 'Hāydī's disappearance sparks outrage among Copts in Beni Suef' [AWR, 2006, week 8, art. 36], by *Sawt al-Ummah* of February 20, 2006, reports Hāydī Samīr Hakīm's disappearance from the perspective of her family without specifying sources. The author claims that around 350 Copts have staged a five-day sit-in for her at al-Fashn Church, although the number seems to be somewhat exaggerated. Samīr Hakīm, the father of the 21-year-old girl, accused a microbus driver with the initials A.S. of kidnapping his daughter.

- "In a juridical dispute against the grand *imām* of the Azhar and the minister of interior: a Copt accuses "Dir Muās" police of helping a Muslim to force his daughter to marry him and follow Islam" [AWR, 2006, week 26, art. 2] by *Sawt al-Ummah*, June 26, 2006. In this case of Suzan Sabāh's father, the 17-year-old kidnappee, took legal action demanding the invalidity of his daughter's conversion to Islam as well as all consequential legal proceedings. He prosecuted both the grand *imām* of the Azhar and the minister of the interior. Sabāh also added that he was sure that the merciful teachings of Islam deny any compulsion in religious belief, rather it urges that Christians be treated fairly. According to the *AWR* editor, when the father of a convert to Islam speaks about the "merciful teachings of Islam" in this way, it gives the appearance of being made for public consumption, and not reflecting true beliefs.

- In "Family of eight absent girls head for presidency to find their daughters", August 7 [AWR, 2006, week 32, art. 17] *Sawt al-Ummah* explains that the families of eight Coptic girls who have disappeared, have found themselves forced to go to the Egyptian president after the security forces and the demonstrations in the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral failed to find their daughter. Eight names with a short description of each case are included. In particular, *Sawt al-Ummah* met with Yvonne Sidqī, mother of one of the girls, Sāra Subhī. According to the magazine, the mother asserted that there were similar cases in her family, like those of her husband's sisters who embraced Islam and married Muslims 15 years ago. No kidnapper is mentioned by name.

- 'A Christian files a complaint against Pope Shenouda for the procedures of converting to Islam' [AWR, 2007, week 11, art. 9] by *Al-Fajr* on March 19 2007, reports about an unprecedented step: a Christian, Christian Kamāl Ubayd Dimyānah, files a complaint against Pope Shenouda and the minister of interior with the Administrative Court. The lawsuit calls for proof of the illegitimacy of conversions to Islam in Egypt, and asks the minister of interior to cancel the conversion of a Coptic girl, Nādyā. Details are given over the daughter's disappearance and her alleged kidnapper, Nar Jamāl al-Sakrān. The story clearly shows only the father's perspective.

- 'Kidnap or conversion' [AWR, 2007, week 33, art. 6] is an *AWR* press review based on eleven articles by *Al-Misrī al-Yawm* and *al-Dustūr*, August 15-19, 2007, about Amal Zakī Nasīm's disappearance. The two newspapers seem to be competing to disclose information about the developments in the investigation and use Amal's parents and one of her colleagues as sources. Church sources, responsible security sources and unknown ones are also mentioned. The family accused Muhammad ʿAbd Allāh of kidnapping her.

- 'A young Coptic woman in secondary school escapes with a young Muslim man, and her family stages a sit-in in front of the State Security building' [AWR, 2007, week 34, art. 5], August 28, by *Sawt al-Ummah*, is the story of the underage Nermīn Majdī Fawzī. The only source quoted in the article is the girl's father who accused a young Muslim man, Ahmad Zahrān, of kidnapping his daughter and provoking her to steal from her mother.

4.3 Sectarian incidents

As in the previous group, in all of the following articles [except one] there is a lack of sources and each case is a resume of the story as reported by the family of the kidnapped victim. The defendant's point of view is likewise not included.

- 'Attempted conversion of a 14-year-old girl triggers strife in Assiut' [AWR, 2004, week 50, art. 19] an AWR press review based on six articles by *Al-Usbūc*, *Al-^cArabī*, *Watanī*, *Al-Maydan*, *Al-Musawwar*, December 10-13, 2004. There are two different versions of Karima's case: according to Father Abanoud, she was forced to convert to Islam and was tempted with money and Muhammad Abdel Mohsen, secretary of the National Democratic Party, was involved; according to Mohsen in an interview with *Al-Usbūc*, it is a love story between a young man and a girl, who is believed to be 14 years old and the prosecution handed the girl over to her father. *Al-Usbūc* and *Al-^cArabī* published interviews with the girl's father who confirmed the story as told by Abdel Mohsen. Then *Al-Musawwar* interviewed Father Abanoud who repeated what he said in the Sunday sermon about the girl being forced to convert to Islam.

- 'Security arrests four priests from al-Duwīqa after they threatened a Christian girl who converted to Islam. Copts demonstrate in protest of the arrests' [AWR, 2006, week 21, art. 60] by *Sawt al-Ummah* [the same subject was also discussed in *al-Fajr*], October 9 2006. The article describes the attempt to assault Dimyānah Makram Hannā, who converted after she married a Muslim although her relatives state that she was kidnapped. The sources used in the article include the report filed by police and one of the priests of the Sam^cān church: he stated that "the convert's husband, Muhammad al-Sayyid Dhakī, enjoys the protection of Colonel Ahmad Mustafā, who threatened a church servant and is quoted as saying that he will bring misfortune to those who try to tear the woman away from her husband"

- 'Christian girl reported missing, ignites sectarian violence in al-Minya' [AWR, year 2007 week 5, art. 38] by *Sawt al-Ummah*, December 30 2006, describes the episode of Kristen Bahjat Yūnān Ghattās from the perspective of the family, no kidnapper's name is mentioned.

- 'Sectarian strife erupted in al-^cUmrānīyah after Tuk Tuk drivers abducted and raped a mentally ill Coptic girl and the State Security investigation team continues to surround the area in order to prevent clashes between Copts and Muslims' [AWR, 2007, week 27, art. 36] by *Sawt al-Ummah* of September 7, 2007. In this case the kidnapping of the 15-year-old Hanān Rasmī, is described from the perspective of the family. Samīr, a Muslim Tuk Tuk driver, is accused of kidnapping the girl.

- 'Three new crises in Muslim-Christians relations' [AWR, 2007, week 43, art. 25] by *Watanī* September 29, 2007. The disappearance of the 17-year old Coptic female Nūrā A. from al-Āmirīyah in Alexandria is described from the family's point of view although other sources are mentioned: "The 23-year old man's mother told the police that her son had a love affair with Nūrā. The file was closed [...]. Conversely, the girl's parents' lawyer highlighted the dangerous impact of the repetition of similar incidents that can be used by foreign organizations as an example of discrimination in Egypt".

4.4 Investigations over rumors or disclosure of truth

When investigations are carried out, the point of view of the family of the kidnapped victim is often recorded. However, sometimes they are still poorly described by newspapers which, anyway, still prefer recording events and spreading revelations, than searching for the truth themselves. In this case, the sources for the articles are the security department which help to disclose information about cases through its official investigations, and the victims themselves when they return home and close the file by telling their version of the story. Interestingly, these stories sometimes contradict earlier reports.

- 'Egyptian authorities hand over two girls to the church after they consider converting to Islam' [AWR, 2005, week 9, art. 14] *AWR* Press review based on seven articles by *al-Ahrām*, *al-Akhhbār*, *al-Jumhūrīyah*, *al-Wafd*, *March*, *al-Ahrār*, *al-Hayāh*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 1, 2005. Mainly, the articles seem to be based on rumors and what undefined “sources” said about the handing over of Maria and Teresa to the Fayyūm Church. The event was managed by the authorities to avoid a new clash with the Copts over two young ladies who were seriously thinking about converting to Islam. Other sources that were mentioned include a statement by the Ministry of the Interior and Bishop Abram of the Fayyūm Church. *Al-Ahrām* mentioned an Egyptian official as a source. Rumors spread that the two girls, Marian and Teresa, fell in love with two of their Muslim colleagues that they wanted to marry and that was why they were considering converting.

- 'Egyptian security apparatus discloses the truth behind the disappearance of two Coptic girls' [AWR, 2006, week 15, art. 36] by *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, on April 5 2006. The only source is the Egyptian security apparatus that has disclosed the truth behind the disappearance of two Coptic girls, Mary As^cad Jirjis and Marcelle Samou^lil Qiddīs in Naj^c Hammādī, Qīnā governorate. Maltreated by their parents, the girls escaped and sought refuge at a Muslim's house in Aswan. Karīma al-Sayyid Muhammad, informed the police of the girls' whereabouts after reading about their disappearance in the paper. As the *AWR* editor notes, it is interesting that the Egyptian security forces make a statement about two such allegations: “For a long time security would not comment and people, not knowing backgrounds, would usually fabricate all kinds of conspiracy stories. The only way to combat conspiracy stories is to openly explain what happened. It is good that this officer made a statement about the two girls by name».

- 'Hoax of the kidnapped Christian girl' [AWR, 2006, week 32, art. 25], by *Rose al-Yūsuf* of August 8, 2006, resumes the strange incident that took place at the police station in Souhāj governorate concerning the alleged kidnapped Mārī Ta^cab Hanā: she suddenly entered the police station with her brother and apologized that her mother had reported her disappearance.

- 'Investigation into the marriage of the Christian, Muná, to a Muslim man' [AWR, 2006, week 37, art. 42] by *Al-Musawwar* on September 8 2006, tries to investigate the story of Muná Ya^cqūb Quryāqus. Brief details are given about her disappearance and on her kidnapper's identity, Khālīd Taha Umrān. The article mainly discusses reports about the assertions from Muná's family, supported by Christian fellows. The author states that Khālīd introduced a document of common law marriage between him and Muná saying that they were in love and decided to marry. The bishop of the church in al-Fayyūm tried many times to meet Muná but police delayed the matter and tried to convince the bishop to talk to Muná over the phone. The article concludes by defending the family, saying that the whole problem can only be solved when Muná's family is allowed to meet her in order to make sure that she is fine and happy.

- 'Copts claim organized gangs kidnapped Christian girl' [AWR, 2006, week 41, art. 53] by *AWR* press review based on five articles from *Sawt al-Ummah*, *Rose al-Yūsuf*, *al-Fajr*, *al-Usbū^c*, *Watanī*,

October 8-10, 2005. This is the incredible story of Lorance Wajih who managed to escape from her kidnappers. *Sawt al-Ummah* and *Rose al-Yūsuf* reported the story with lots of details about what Lorance said and that her family confirmed. The independent newspaper *al-Fajr* published a different version of the story stating that she ran away because of differences with her father; but in both cases the source is the same, Lorance. The press review mentioned a further source, reported by *Sawt al-Ummah*, October 9: Archpriest Athanasius of Anbā Antonius church in al-Mahallah denounced two new cases of Coptic girls who disappeared at the same time, Dīnā Amīn and Nirmīn Ayyād.

- 'Searching for the truth in Kafr Tuhurmus' [AWR, 2006, week 41, art. 95] by *Al-Uṣbūʿ*, October 2, 2006. The article considers incidents of girls disappearing from the village of Kafr Tuhurmus and rumors that these girls were kidnapped. The corpses of some of the missing girls have been found. The inhabitants of the village are so scared that they do not allow their children to go to school alone. The police insist that only one girl went missing while villages say that there are around 103 missing girls. Some of the people from the villages told the author that a few days earlier they saw two young men riding a motorcycle and they suspected that they are involved. Hanān Badawī from *Al-Uṣbūʿ* newspaper visited the missing girls' homes. The author reported the stories of Shaymā and Mu'mina as told by the families, and wonders about the missing truth behind these incidents.

- 'Christine, back to her family, denies being forced to convert' [AWR, 2006, week 43, art. 33] by *Rose al-Yūsuf* October 12, 2006 [the same issue was discussed in: *Al-Uṣbūʿ* on October 16]. The article refers to what was recorded by the head of the investigations bureau: six months later she was reported missing, Christine Muntasir Subhi turned herself in to the Kirdāsah police station and her case was finally closed. Then the article mentions the report filed by Christine's father and the investigation that followed: the alleged kidnapping, when inquired, refuted the allegations.

- 'The evangelization of Muslim and Christian girls begins in chat rooms' [AWR, 2006, week 46, art. 40] from *Al-Fajr*, November 13, 2006. Is an investigation into attempts to Islamize Christian girls in chat rooms. The testimony of the grandfather of Mīrnā Thābit Fahmī, 16 years old, from Alexandria, follows. She got to know a man who claimed he was a Christian via a chat room. After she disappeared, the grandfather called this man and he revealed that his real name is Ahmad. He confessed that he had kidnapped the girl. The *AWR* editor noted: "It is very unlikely that Ahmad would confess that he had kidnapped the girl. It is possible that Mīrnā and Ahmad were in love and that one of them had suggested that Ahmad use the name Michael so that her family did not discover the truth".

- 'The disappearance of Suhāj girls is a biased rumor aimed at disturbing the security of the country' from *Al-Akḥbār*, January 23, 2007 [AWR, 2007, week 3, art. 48] informs on what General Ahmad ʿAbd al-Wahāb, chief of Suhāj Security Department, said, disputing rumors about the cases of Sārah Hāshim Ibrāhīm, Basmah: investigations proved that they wanted to escape abuse and pressure.

- In 'Maryam's return saved Naj Hammādī from sectarian sedition' [AWR year 2007, week 31, art. 25] *Watanī* of August 5, 2007, reports what the Christian girl said when she returned safely to her family [she disappeared during the Monastery of Bishop Bilāmūn's feast celebrations, in Naj Hammādī, and claimed that she had been in the cemetery and fallen asleep). *Watanī* add. "Ātif Girgis, a Christian citizen, said that the celebration is always overcrowded and it is normal that some problems happen. He also said that Christians live side by side with their Muslim brothers and that there are neither clashes nor frictions between them".

4.5 The alleged victim speaking out against their family's claims

This category is the shortest, but also the most varied. The alleged victims when threatened by their family, sometimes find a way to speak out. The cases become interesting for the newspapers who record their story with lots of sentimental details. Moreover, it is the only way for the alleged kidnapper to defend himself and openly deny allegations.

- 'Ahmad and Rāndā...Egypt's Romeo and Juliet' [AWR, 2005, week 11, art. 15], *Sawt al-Ummah*, March 14 2005. The article reports the constant fear of two young people who have fallen in love: Ahmad Ridā Ahmad Ibrāhīm, a Muslim, and Rāndā Barsoum Shukrī Abd al-Nour, a Christian. "She asked me to help her convert to Islam": for the first time a newspaper report the kidnapper's version. Then, he continues "Rāndā eventually escaped from her father's house and sought refuge at my place. She told me 'I left my home. I do not want to live with them because they will force me to marry someone I do not love'". Rāndā asserts that she converted and married him of her own free will but she repeatedly received death threats over the phone. The article concludes: "Rāndā's father is doing his best to get his daughter back, but her mother phoned Ahmad and asked him to take good care of her and sincerely wished to be able to see her daughter again".

- 'Coptic family kidnaps Amīra from her husband's house' [AWR, 2005, week 11, art. 16] from *Al-Uṣbūʿ*, April 14, 2005, reports the trick that Amīra's family contrived in order to kidnap her back. The article is based on Amīra's perspective and that of ʿAlī her Muslim husband. It states: "ʿAlī remembered the days when he used to play with his wife together when they were little children. They had grown up together and she had always talked about Islam and the rights granted to women in both marriage and divorce. She had learnt some verses of the *Qurʾān* and had kept her knowledge secret from her family. When she turned 21, she went to the security authorities to complete the procedures required for converting to Islam"..

- "Blaze of fresh sedition about to erupt in al-Sharqīya" [AWR, 2005, week 17, art. 20] from *Al-Maydān*, April 21, 2005. *Al-Maydān* interviewed Samī, 51-year-old, on April 17, 2005 at his place. He stated that he was not kidnapped but voluntarily converted. Samī said he went directly to the state security investigations department for two reasons: first for protection and second to register his conversion to Islam. Asked whether he had differences with the church that prompted him to convert to switch faith from Christianity to Islam, he said he had many: "The church, in a later stage, after it received news of procedures for my conversion to Islam, has tried to offer a lot of financial support, but I have refused and announced that I will never back down". Samī who has a 15-year-old son named Rāmī, said his wife left him in the third year of their marriage, adding he tried to work things out or resort to divorce through the church but all his efforts went down the drain."

- "Mariam asks President Mubārak to protect her" [AWR, 2007, week 12, art. 5] by *Al-Uṣbūʿ*, March 26, 2007. This is the story of Mariam, a 20-year-old woman who converted to Islam and married Yūsuf ʿAbd al-Fatāh, asking for protection: her family, who have money and power, continued to threaten and cause problems for the couple after they were married. She wrote a letter to the president and journalists then reported about this in *al-Uṣbūʿ*. As AWR noted such a request was more likely to have been directed toward local police. That it was sent to the president appears to have been done for public consumption and is an indication of the relationship between *al-Uṣbūʿ* and Egyptian police³².

5. CONCLUSION

³² One year and a half before, another letter from kidnaps was published by *Al-Uṣbūʿ* (26th December 2005): "Former Christians appeal to president to intervene to stop their handover to church" [AWR, 2005, week 52, art. 5]; that was sent by Marian and Christine Nadir Kamal who were already known by newspaper because since 12th December were reporting about their disappearance. In Maria's case that it the first news spread about her.

The stories mentioned in this paper are not really stories about conversion. Conversion or alleged conversion is just the link that connects each case: it gives the background, the context of the drama that newspapers have picked up and translated into a story. But the protagonists are still the people, with their feelings, anger and shame.

Images that come from articles show that newspapers prefer to record than to investigate claims. In particular, articles about forced disappearance are full of references to the most common stereotypes about abuses and conspiracy, usually spread by rumors. The word “kidnap” first of all: it has become commonly used as a synonym of “conversion” and some would argue it is even more common than “conversion”. Sometimes these reported stories become thriller plots, as in the case of Lorraine Wajih ‘Imil, 15 years old, who miraculously came “back from hell” as *Watani International* stated in October 2006 or detained as “a punishment for her modern clothes” in Helwan as *al-Katiba Tibiya* denounced in the same month [or simply escaped because problems with her father about wanting private classes for all her subjects, according to *al-Fajr*]³³. The disappeared girls can be depicted as the “heroine of the latest story of conversions”, as Karima was, the 14-year-old daughter of a poor Christian villager in Durunka [Assiut] about whom an almost Hamletesque doubt remains: tempted by money as Father Abanoud repeated to *al-Mussawar*, or simply in love with a Muslim, as Karima’s father confirmed to *Al-Uṣbūʿ* and *Al-Arabiʿ*? [AWR, 2004, week 50, art. 19]. Other times the kidnapper himself, in the rare time that a newspaper quotes him, seems to act as a tragic co-protagonist, for example Ahmad in “Ahmad and Rāndā...Egypt’s Romeo and Juliet” reported by *Sawt al-Ummah* [2005, week, 11, art. 15].

The aim of this project was to give a methodical account of the phenomenon by trying to quantify reported cases with a particular focus on newspaper sources. Such contradictory material has made it difficult and distrust of people [whether they are relatives, the kidnapped victim or kidnappers], can even reinforce this distrust because of the lack of verification³⁴. The debate over social disease that followed the discovery of the Mallawi girls [AWR, week 22, art. 19] was stopped when the priest’s wife, Wafa’ Costantin, converted provoking Copts’ anger and allegations of kidnapping. Since then conversion (in particular kidnapping) has become a media affair.

The Christian papers *Watani* and its sister publication *Watani International* are the newspapers that are most interested in reporting this issue, with regard to both facts and discussions. Weekly independent newspapers are mainly interested in recording stories so most of the cases come from them: *Sawt al-Ummah* and *al-Maydan* first of all, and, since 2007, overtaken by *al-Dustur*. The official daily press is mostly silent: after taking part in Mallawi girls’ and Wafa Constantine’s case in the wake of the phenomenon between 2001 and 2004, in the following years they intervened to deny what al-Jazeera satellite channel had reported regarding the Egyptian authorities’ refusal to hand over the two girls that sparked the country’s interest in 2005 as *Al-Ahrām* [2005, week 9, art. 14], and to support the unusual Egyptian security force’s statement that openly refuted allegations about two girls by name as reported by *al-Akḥbār* [AWR, 2007, week 3, art. 48]. The Christian *al-Katiba Tibiya* is as interested in the argument as it is in depicting the stories³⁵.

³³ AWR, 2006, week 41, art. 53 and 59; week 42, art. 57; *al-Katiba Tibiya* 10/2006.

³⁴ Reports with mentioned and not mentioned names mingle together, claims and disclosure of true do the same: newspapers approximately edit fact because based on rumours. Fatia’s case is one of many ones just draft by Egyptian newspapers. Her story was reported by *Sawt al-Ummah* as one of the three incidents that caused some sectarian problems between Muslims and Christians in Cairo: “The second case involved a Christian husband who accused a Muslim man of urging his wife Fatin to escape from him and convert to Islām. Fatin, who was experiencing difficult times with her husband used to visit her Muslim friends and discuss her problems with them. She would also discuss the relationship between husband and wife in religions, which deepened her understanding of Islam until she decided to convert to Islām and escape from home”. Who is Fatin? Where does exactly she live? Who is her husband, who the Muslim man? The authors do not say more. [AWR, 2006, week 48, art. 36]

³⁵ About the images spread by press coming from the stereotypes usually claimed by rumours, it is interesting to note those depicted by *al-Katiba Tibiya* in its titles. Three of the 15 conversion cases reported by the newspaper between 2005 and 2007 are clearly presented as due to security pressure that in one case supported a Muslim chemist purpose, and in another one a Muslim

Lack of verification, approximation in reporting fact, and especially selective information are all factors involved in these cases: The idea of “advocacy journalism”, that to say reporting is done with the purpose of convincing somebody of a certain point of view is prevalent [AWR, 2001, week 26, art. 26]. These stories, based on the sources the author gives most credibility to, add to people's suspicions. Finally, the growing and exasperating attempts to get the media to pay serious attention to conversion cases (alleged or not) show the frustrations that exist in Egyptian society with the issue.

neighbour attempt; four as mysterious disappearance, five as kidnapping, two due to psychological disease, one of whom includes financial pressure as well. The last one case the immorality first of all, and collusion of police [al-Kitiba Tibiya, 2005, n. 2, 3, 4, 5; 2006, n. 3, 4, 6, 10, 11; 2007, n. 3, 4].