Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding these critically important and timely hearings today about a serious and developing human rights crisis: the deepening repression against Egypt’s Coptic Christians, the Muslim Middle East’s largest religious minority.

Already Egyptian human rights reports suggest that up to 100,000 of this population of 8-10 million have left Egypt during this Arab Winter and that number will soar in the months ahead. As with other sudden, mass exoduses in world history, this one is a sure sign that a minority community fears persecution.

This hearing also occurs while the results of the first round of balloting for Egypt’s new parliament are being tabulated. So far, they indicate that assorted Islamists have won about two-thirds of the seats that were voted on last week. The Freedom and Justice Party of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the New York Times labels the "moderate" Islamist group, appears to have won a plurality, garnering 40 percent of the seats, while the "ultraconservative," Taliban-like Salafis captured about 25 percent of the seats. By comparison, the secular-leaning Egyptian Bloc -- backed with heavy Coptic and other liberal support -- came in a distant third.

The final results will not be known until January. However, subsequent voting is expected to show even more dire results for non-Islamists. That is because this first phase encompassed the large cities of Cairo and Alexandria, which include more non-traditional populations than do the rural areas, which are to vote later. The Center’s analyst projects an overall Islamist gain of 76 percent of the lower house of parliament in the three rounds.

The implication of an Islamist mandate is much more far-reaching than is suggested in many international news articles, which typically stress possible alcohol and entertainment bans (maybe because their foreign correspondents are disproportionately affected by them). In fact,
fundamental individual freedoms of religion and speech and democracy itself are all at risk. Moreover, the new constitution will be drafted by persons selected by this new Islamist-dominated parliament.

The Copts have long been caught in a vise between two competing forces – a brutal military government and religiously intolerant Islamists. These two forces, working usually independently, but on occasion together especially at the lower ranks of the security services, direct periodic, violent and indiscriminate attacks against Copts and their churches. On occasion and now with increasing frequency, these attacks are taking the form of pogroms on vulnerable Coptic villagers. This situation is exacerbated by state laws that suppress Christians’ ability to repair or build churches. The government has time and again failed to protect Coptic minorities from such violence and denies them justice in the wake of attacks, sometimes arresting the victims along with, or instead of, the attackers and at other times resolving the matter not with a legal judgment but simply with a forced handshake between assailant and victim.

One of the most graphic, recent demonstrations of this pattern of attack and impunity was the Maspero episode in October. In that event, Coptic Christians, marching through a section of Cairo to protest religious repression were ruthlessly dispersed by the military, resulting in dozens killed and hundreds wounded. Islamists then attacked the hospitals and funeral processions for the victims. The government denied responsibility for the army’s attack on the demonstrators, exonerated the military and arrested about 28 people, almost all of them Copts; they, and at least one other person who criticized the military actions at Maspero in a blog -- Abdel Fattah, a secular Muslim, who is charged with “incitement to terrorism” – are reportedly still in prison.

The chain of events began on September 30, 2011, when a mob some 1000 people-strong from the village of al-Marinab, Aswan province, burned and demolished a Coptic building that was under renovation. Coptic homes and businesses were also attacked. A mob prevented the fire brigade from entering the village, and security forces did not intervene. Aswan’s governor sided with the mob, stating that the church did not have permission for the renovation.

On October 8 and 9, Coptic youth along with some Muslims held a large demonstration against the burning of the al-Marinab church and the
general failure of the government to protect Copts. When they passed through the areas of El Qolaly and Abdeen in Cairo, they were attacked by some of the Muslim residents. On October 9, the armed forces ruthlessly crushed the largely Coptic protest in Cairo’s Maspero area, near the state broadcasting building. Some twenty seven were killed, mostly all Copts, along with one soldier, and over 300 were wounded. There is no evidence that the Coptic protestors were armed.

At that time a news anchor on Egyptian state television broadcast that Copts were attacking the army and called on Egyptians to defend it. This report, which was retracted by the station the following day, immediately agitated many Muslims, who went to Maspero and clashed with the protesters. Salafi television stations broadcast that Christians had burned a Qu’ran at Maspero, stoking further violence against Copts and a march on the Coptic hospital where many of the wounded had been taken. On October 11, funeral processions for several of the murdered Copts were attacked by armed thugs who blocked their way and hurled stones and Molotov cocktails at them. Those in the funeral procession sought shelter and called the army emergency phone line for help, but none was forthcoming for several hours.

Prime Minister Essam Sharaf blamed the Maspero violence on “invisible hands,” implying foreign interference (often interpreted to mean American or Israeli). At an October 12 press conference, the military blamed Christian protesters and "enemies of the revolution" for triggering the clashes on the 9th. Generals from the Supreme Council of Armed Forces showed footage of priests and a Coptic Christian activist they accused of "instigating" the Maspero violence. Major General Adel Emara, a member of the ruling council and deputy defense minister, tried to clear the military of any blame in the killings. He denied that troops opened fire at protesters, claiming their weapons did not have live ammunition. He said it was not in "the dictionary of the armed forces to run over bodies ... even when battling our enemy." According to forensic reports for the slain protesters, a third of the victims were crushed by armored vehicles, while two-thirds were shot with live ammunition. On October 15, 28 persons, almost all Copts, were reported arrested for the violence and remain in jail.

It is apparent that the Copts will be forced to continue to contend with this military and will now also face a much empowered Islamist sector. The previously underground and unorganized Salafis are forthright about what they hope to bring about with their new found strength: they describe their
plans for a sharia system similar to those in Saudi Arabia, or under the Taliban. Quite simply, freedom of speech and religion, as we know it, will not be permitted if they have their way.

The biggest winner of the elections is the Muslim Brotherhood and it has not been clear in articulating its vision. But its Freedom and Justice Party's 93-page program sheds some light on it. As Egyptian Copt and policy analyst Samuel Tadros, currently a Fellow of the Hudson Center for Religious Freedom, noted in reviewing this program, the Brotherhood is pragmatic but it is not moderate.

Tadros writes in the new issue of Hudson’s Current Trends journal:

“[T]he first clear aspect of the FJP program is the totality of its vision. There is no aspect of human life that the program does not aim to discuss and to put under state regulation. In what should seem bewildering to outside observers, the program leaves no detail unmentioned, from participation in cultural festivals abroad (pg. 85), to fast and free internet services (91), and even to publishing scholarly journals (33). …[T]he view it takes of all human actions as regulated and supervised by the state leaves no room for doubt on the kind of state they aim to build. …

“The program then explains that the goal of the party is ‘cleansing the soul and hearts, upgrading the feelings, refining the character, by calling for a commitment to worship, good manners, sociability and behavior, and to remind people of God, the Day of Judgment so as to wake up conscience’ (4). The Mubarak regime had furthermore turned Egypt away from God and ‘into a colony of Western and Zionist policies.’ According to the program, ‘forgetting the Day of Judgment and God is one of the most important reasons that led to the Egyptian people's revolt’(5) promises to tie politics to Islamic principles and values (6). The principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation (7), while the non-Muslim minority is given the right to resort to their own religious rulings in family and religious affairs (7).”

In short, the Copts now confront a political future defined by a (for the time being) secular but brutal military and an all-encompassing regulatory Islamist state that mixes sharia strictures with pragmatic measures. There is little room for optimism, not only for the Copts but for Egyptian liberals in general. For American foreign policy, there will be no good choices, only
less bad ones. We will need to discern what they are. Certainly, admonishing the Copts along with their persecutors to use “restraint,” as the White House did in its only public response to the Maspero massacre, is not right, nor just, nor helpful in advancing American interests.