

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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## BQ 935 – Nr. 40/2026

# The abduction and forced marriage of girls as a weapon against minorities

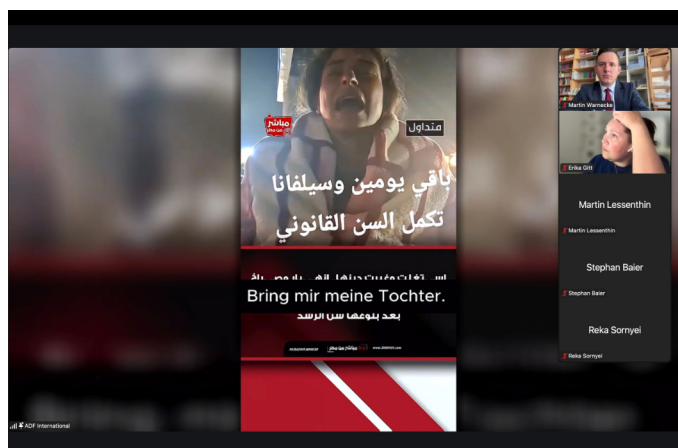
## Human rights activists are calling for greater commitment and protection for Christians in Egypt

(Bonn, 09.06.2026) On 27 May, ADF International held a press conference in Vienna on the systematic abduction, forced Islamisation and forced marriage of Christian girls and women in Egypt. The panel discussion was attended by, amongst others, the spokesperson for human rights for the ÖVP parliamentary group, Dr Gudrun Kugler; the president of the Coptic human rights organisation EUCHOR, Medhat Klada; the ambassador for human rights and co-editor of the Yearbooks on Religious Freedom and the Persecution of Christians, Martin Lessenthin, the lawyer and press spokesperson for the International Society of Oriental Christians (IGOC), Medhat Klada, as well as Dr Felix Böllmann from ADF International and the President of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) and the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), Prof Dr Thomas Schirrmacher.

The event focused on the case of 17-year-old autistic Coptic girl Silvana Atef Fanous, who was abducted in Upper Egypt in October 2025 and whose family has been searching tirelessly for her ever since. Mariam

Youssef Asaad Hanna, the mother of the abduction victim Silvana, expressed her distress and despair in a video message. According to the experts, Silvana's fate is emblematic of the suffering endured by Christian families in the North African country for decades. Although Christians in the predominantly Muslim country officially enjoy legal protection, this is not reflected in the reality of life for Coptic believers.

Human rights expert Martin Lessenthin highlighted the conspiracy theory prevalent among Copts that the Egyptian president is their "supreme protector" against Islamist attacks. However, the daily reality of the Christian minority proves the opposite. According to estimates, there are more than 5,000 abductions followed by forced conversion to Islam each year. Perpetrators are more likely to be protected and supported by local authorities than the victims. Lessenthin accused the leadership of the Coptic Orthodox

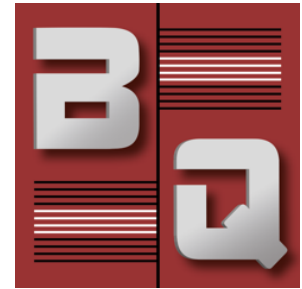


Screenshot of the event during Mariam Youssef Asaad Hanna's video message

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Church of a lack of courage. Out of fear of repression and discrimination, its representatives tend to remain silent. This also applies to Coptic church representatives in Europe.

Thomas Schirmmacher, whose statement is reproduced in full below, said that the abduction, forced marriage and enslavement of girls and women are used worldwide as a weapon against religious or ethnic minorities. This is also observed in Egypt.

### Statement by Thomas Schirmmacher: The abduction and forced marriage of girls as a weapon against religious and ethnic minorities

The abduction of girls and even married women, often followed by forced marriage or enslavement, has been deliberately used as a weapon of war and terror in many conflicts – including, and particularly, against religious or ethnic minorities.

Abduction and forced marriage serve to spread psychological terror, destroy family structures and sever the victims' ties to their own people or religion. In armed conflicts, sexualised violence (rape, slavery, forced prostitution) is systematically used to demoralise opponents, redraw ethnic boundaries, or simply to demonstrate power and violence.

During the Bosnian War in the 1990s, Serbian militias abducted and raped tens of thousands of Muslim girls and women, often after separating them from their families, in order to terrorise and displace the Muslim population.

Thousands of Yazidi girls and women were abducted in northern Iraq in 2014, categorised into 'marketplaces' (virgins, married women, mothers), and sold as sex slaves or forced 'wives' to fighters and buyers.

Burmese security forces in Myanmar systematically used sexual violence and enslavement against Rohingya women and girls in brutal 'clearance operations'. Alarming, this continues in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, where the perpetrators belong to the same religion as the victims.

In ethnic conflicts in Africa (e.g. the LRA in Uganda or conflicts in Tigray), the abduction of women and girls for forced marriage to fighters has been documented and is deliberately used to subjugate entire groups.

UN reports explicitly refer to sexual violence as a weapon of war and terror, including abduction, forced prostitution and forced marriage. Several resolutions by the UN and EU human rights bodies emphasise that the targeted forced marriage and enslavement of members of ethnic and religious minorities constitute crimes against humanity or war crimes.

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Screenshot of the event during Thomas Schirmmacher's speech

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Yet these crimes also occur in so-called times of peace: In Pakistan, young girls from Christian and Hindu minorities are particularly affected. The perpetrators often abduct the minors, force them to convert to Islam and then marry them off, usually to older men. Although national laws against child marriage and forced marriage exist, they are often not consistently enforced due to social pressure and a lack of implementation by the authorities. In a scandalous ruling on 25 March 2026, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has just upheld the marriage between a kidnapped 13-year-old Christian girl and her 30-year-old kidnapper.

### Forced Islamisation in Egypt

The issue of the abduction of underage Christian girls in Egypt for the purpose of forced Islamisation and forced marriage to Muslim men is a serious human rights problem that has been known for years. Affected families and human rights organisations repeatedly report cases in which young Coptic Christian girls disappear and are subsequently forced to convert to Islam against their will.

The abductions often follow a similar pattern, in which the girls, after their disappearance, are coerced or manipulated into declaring an official conversion to Islam. Once such a conversion is officially registered, a return to Christianity is effectively impossible under Egyptian law and social practice.

Critics and human rights groups regularly denounce the failure of state authorities to investigate these cases. In many situations, the police react hesitantly, for example by failing to accept missing person reports or doing so too late. The abductions are often portrayed by the authorities as voluntary conversions resulting from romantic relationships, meaning that serious criminal prosecution of the perpetrators is frequently not pursued.

For the families affected, the loss of their children represents an enormous psychological burden, which is further exacerbated by the frequent threats and the lack of support from the authorities. This situation has led to deep insecurity within Egypt's Coptic community and a feeling that young Christian women are at particular risk because of their religious affiliation. Some observers also point out that, in cases where a woman manages to escape, she may even face violence from her own family, as conversion to Islam is perceived as a disgrace to the Christian family.



Screenshot of the event

### Downloads and Links

- **Photo 1:** Screenshot of the event during Mariam Youssef Asaad Hanna's video message

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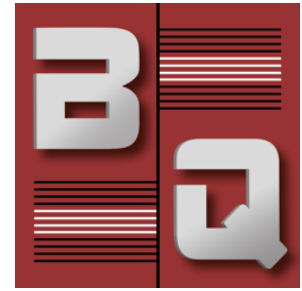
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- **Photo 2:** Screenshot of the event during Thomas Schirmmacher's speech
- **Photo 3:** Screenshot of the event
- **Photo 4:** Screenshot of the event during the statement of Martin Lessenthin
- **IDEA press release:** <https://www.idea.de/artikel/entfuehrte-koptin-menschenrechtler-fordern-schutz-fuer-christen-in-aegypten>
- **Press release from ADF International:** <https://adfinternational.org/de/news/wiener-pressekonferenz-zur-christenverfolgung>
- **BQ 931 – 36/2026:** Diskriminierung von Christen durch Justiz und Behörden in Ägypten: <https://bonn-profiles.net/?p=12485>

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