Arabization and Islamization in Egypt:
(Based on the book: Motherland Lost)

- Arab tribes poured out of the Peninsula challenging the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires
- Damascus fell in 634, Jerusalem and Antioch in 637

2 Different Narratives:
- Mohammed sent emissaries to a local governor, most likely Byzantine, Muqawqis. Muqawqis sent Mohammed a gift and 2 female Coptic slaves. One of these slaves was Maria the Copt, who became Mohammed’s concubine and gave birth to his son Ibrahim.
- According to the Hadith, Mohammed told his followers “You will conquer Egypt, a land where the Qirat is used, Treat its people kindly since they have a right of kinship upon you,” and “By Allah, respect the Copts of Egypt, for you shall conquer them, and they shall be your supporters in the cause of Allah.”
- After a siege, Alexandria fell to the Muslim Arabs in 641. This meant the Egypt was fully conquered. The Byzantine Empire would take back Alexandria in 645, only to lose it to the Arabs again.
- In the early 20th century, using the peak of Egyptian nationalism, those who wanted to highlight unity between Egypt’s Christians and Muslims used the successful invasion as evidence that the Copts welcomed the Arab Muslim invasion as rescue from the Byzantine. Islamist writers even propose that the if it had not been for its preservation by the invading Muslim Arabs, Oriental Orthodox Coptic Christianity would’ve seen its end at the hand of the Eastern Orthodox Byzantines.
- However, contrary to this narrative, Modern Coptic authors stress that their ancestors did not welcome the invasion. Some played on the narrative that they did not support the Byzantine or the Arabs but were passive with them. Others stressed early stories of Coptic resistance to the invasion.
- There is no evidence that the Copts assisted the Arabs in their invasion.
- Modern Muslim authors and scholars portray the invasion as kind to the country’s inhabitants and one that left no blood on their hands, using incidents such as when Amr ibn al-‘As told Coptic Pope Benjamin I to come out of exile and return to Alexandria. Amr met with Benjamin and praised him for his piety. Amr gave Benjamin all the rights the Byzantines took from him and saw Benjamin as the representative of the Copts. The jizya placed on the Copts, however, was higher than the Byzantine tax.
- John of Nikiu, a Coptic bishop from the 7th century and Ibn Abd Al Hakam, an Egyptian Muslim historian of the 9th century, both highlighted the brutality of the invasion.
Popes or ATMs:
- Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates repeatedly changed the governor of Egypt, to ensure that no governor would become powerful enough to challenge the caliph, burdened the Copts.
- Instead of focusing on long term plans for Egypt, they focused on collecting as much money as possible, by increasing taxes on the Copts and attempting to forced money from the popes.
- An example of this is Abdel Aziz Ibn Marwan, who threw Pope John III into prison for perceived insult and forced him to pay for his release. Another is Governor Abdallah Ibn Abdel Malek who arrested Pope Alexander II to receive money in order for his release. Pope Alexander II was forced to travel throughout Egypt to raise money for the fine. This happened again with Pope Michael the I and the III.
- The Bashmuric Revolt, by Copts, led to the imprisonment and torture of Pope Michael I at the hands of Marwan II, the last Umayyad caliph as a form of punishment for the rebellion. Popes were usually held accountable for local rebellion or failure of Copts to pay the required taxation.
- Pope Mina I (767-776) was forced to perform hard labor.

Egypt’s Dhimmi:
- The limited number of invaders in the country and a huge lack of Egyptian converts, as well as the already existing distinction in dress and culture, gave no need for regulated distinction.
- Copts were expected to pay jizya to the Muslims. Some have calculated the jizya to amount to 3 months’ salary per year of a daily worker and identify the heavy tax as a reason for massive conversions throughout the centuries, especially by poor Copts who could not afford it, and only had 3 option to pay jizya, convert, or die.
- The modern Coptic narrative says that the richer Copts were able to cling to their religion. — The narrative is not historically accurate since the most important reason for conversion was the opportunities it opened to advancement in position.
- Copts were expected to acknowledge their subjection by acting as inferiors since they were dhimmi.
- A pact was supposedly signed between Caliph Omar and Syrian Christians outlining the framework of dhimmitude. The pact may have been a later development. The ext involved a number of conditions that the non-Muslim community is to subject to and that breaking them would mean violence. The conditions were:
  1) promising not to build new churches or monasteries nor renew old ones that are damaged
  2) promising not to manifest their religion publicly, display crosses or ring church bells
  3) had to show respect to Muslims by rising from their seats when a Muslim wants to sit
  4) clipping the front of their heads
pledging not to imitate Muslims in their dress
agreement not to mount on saddles, take Muslims as servants or to build houses over
Muslim houses
- These laws already appeared in the first period of Umayyad and Abbasid rule
- Caliph Yazid II (720-724) ordered the destruction of church icons
- Abbasid Caliph Al Hadi (785-786) ordered the destruction of churches.
- Under Caliph Al Mutawakil (847-661), the attempt to systematically differentiate
Copts and Muslims by appearance was made. Copts were forced to wear hazel colored
clothes with special marks on them, forbidden to ride horses and ordered them to use
saddles made of wood when mounting other animals, required to hide crosses in
processions and funerals and ordered to put statues of dogs or monkeys in front of their
houses.
- Main reason for differentiation was the increase of Egyptian converts to Islam, since
phenotypical differences were no longer reliable to differentiate between Copts and
Muslims.
- First decades of Muslim rule did not require the adoption of the Arabic language, but it
was made the official language in terms of its usage in government service in 705,
forcing Copts planning to have a career in any government service to learn the
language of their invaders.
- The adoption of Arabic was slow and initially limited to government servants, but
became more widespread with the population balance tilting towards Muslims, which
would lead to the near extinction of the Coptic language.
- At the time of Pope Michael I at the end of the Umayyad caliphate, Coptic sources
inform us that 24K Copts converts.
- Scholars point to higher levels of conversion under the rule of Omar II, the Umayyad
caliph and under the Abbasid caliphate.
- Omar II removed the jizya from converts to Isla, encouraging conversion and
increased the taxation burden on non-Muslims by decreeing that jizya would be
collected even on the dead.
- Abbasid empire embraced converts of Islam more so than the Umayyads. Some
scholars point to the late 9th century and early 10th century as the time when the
population began to tip in favor of the Muslims. Others point to the Fatimid caliphate.

Hopeless Rebellions:
- During the first two centuries of Muslim rule in Egypt, Copts rebelled unsuccessfully a
number of times. Copts in the east of the Delta revolted in 725 and were crushed. They
revolted again in the Delta in the 750s.
- Most significant revolt was the Bashmuric revolts by Bashmurians living in the north
of the Delta in marsh land. Under the leadership of Mina Ibn Bakira, Bashmurians
were difficult for armies to conquer because of the nature of their marshy land.
- In the Bashmuric region, Copts were able to resist for a relatively long period against repeated attacks of the Arabic army and inflicted heavy losses on their oppressors.
- Revolts flared up in the last years of the Umayyads. Umayyad Hawthara, Marwan's governor in Egypt, had already failed to end the revolt, in spite of his repeated expeditions by land and by sea. Marwan proposed a treaty, but the Copts refused it.
- Marwan put the army he brought from Damascus along with existing troops fighting the Bashmuric revolters.
- Hawthara took Coptic pope Khail hostage and transported him to Rosetta, threatening to kill him if they did not end the rebellion.
- Copts attacked the army and destroyed Rosetta, a government stronghold. Marwan reacted by ordering his troops to sack Coptic villages, churches and monasteries.
- Under the Abbasids, the expedition sent by the governor Yazid against them was defeated and his local high officials were killed.
- In 830, the caliph al-Ma’mun, sent a strong army to the area under the command of the Turkish general Afshin to end rebellion ibn the Delta. The army destroyed the rebels in the eastern part of the Delta and in Alexandria, but was helpless against the Bashmurites.
- Afshin approached the patriarch and asked him to stop the revolts. The patriarch agreed to intervene, but his letters to the rebels did nothing.
- Al Ma’mun took command of the army and launched systematic attack on the rebels. The caliph offered the Bashmurites a treaty that they accepted. The army destroyed and burned the entire area to wipe out all possibility of further revolts.
- These rebellions achieved nothing but drained the pride and power of Copts.
- Coptic church accepted the conditions of Muslim rule.

**Shia Rulers of Egypt:**
- The Fatimids in their early stages, were kind to Copts and the number of Coptic state employees who were increasingly allowed to occupy high positions in government services rose. Some Copts were very powerful and rich under the Fatimids.
- Their kind treatment to Copts and dependence on Copts as wealthy bureaucrats might have been a result of the status of Fatimids as Shias ruling over a Sunni Muslim population.
- The rise of Coptic bureaucrats led to great frustration and anger among the Muslim population leading to anti-Coptic propaganda and mob attacks. (Sounds familiar)
- Fatimid caliph, Al Muizz held debates between representatives of different religions in his palace. Some Fatimid caliphs even allowed those who had converted to Islam under pressure to convert back to Christianity.
- Al Muizz intervened and stopped a Muslim mob to allow Copts to build a church.
- Fatimid caliphs took part in Coptic religious celebrations.
This kind treatment however would banish under Al Muizz’s grandson Al Hakim Bi Amr Allah, who was the greatest persecutor of Copts. In 10004, he ordered high ranking Coptic bureaucrats to convert to Islam or be killed. He decreed Copts were to wear a heave wooden cross around their necks, which led to the use of the slur “blue bone” against Copts that continues until today. Copts were forced to wear black clothes to differentiate themselves from Muslims and forbade them from wearing silk, riding horses or having Muslim house servants. He ordered the destruction of churches and confiscated their property.

In 1009, he awoke the grief of Christians around the world when he ordered the complete destruction of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Al Hakim also named women from appearing in public and killed dogs.

His persecution of Copts led to mass waves of conversion and the population became majority Muslim.

In lesser extents than persecution under Al Hakim, Copts continued to be persecuted in the following decades.

Al Mustansir Billah (1036-1094) ordered churches in Egypt’s closed.

Saladin’s uncle, Shirkuh is records by Coptic historians as having initiated severe persecution in which many Copts were killed, churches burned and jizya increased.

During the Crusades, Copts were viewed with suspicion by the Muslim rulers and population. They did not aid the Crusaders and the Crusaders barred them from performing pilgrimage to Jerusalem because they were deemed heretics. During invasions of Egypt, the Crusaders were brutal with both Copts and Muslims.

Near the end of the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt, c. 1131-1145, majority of Copts lost their native Coptic language and increasingly used Arabic in their daily lives.

The Mamluks:

Copts faced intense persecution under the Mamluks and it was during their rule that the Coptic population as a percentage fell to the current levels.

Mamluks were Turkish, Georgian and Circassian slaves bought by rulers as children and trained to become a warrior class.

Baibars, a Mamluk sultanate gathered all Copts in Cairo and attempted to burn them with Cairo’s Jewish population but was stopped by Mamluk princes, last minute.

Mobs in Cairo became active participants in the persecution of Copts, demanding the imposition of more restrictions possibly due to the intensification of Sunni religious culture at that time.

Following Baibar, Copts enjoyed high positions as civil servants and were met with hatred by the Muslim population.

Cairo mobs would wreak havoc when a Coptic civil servant ignored his restrictions by riding on a horse, wearing silk or walking confidently. They would attack that Copt
and then enter a rampage and looting of Coptic homes and churches. They took place in 1300 and continued for 2 years.

- Coptic civil servants were met with constant suspicion from the Muslim converts. Due to persecution, many Coptic civil servants converted but were viewed with suspicion from the mob and demanded they leave their positions until their allegiance to Islam was proved.

- These mobs distributed pamphlets and speeches attacking Copts as a form of propaganda against them. In 1321, after fires in Cairo, Copts were arrested and blamed for them, leading to another wave of mob action that resulted in hundreds of deaths and dozens of churches destroyed.

- The number of churches from 1200 to 1600 fell from 2048 to 112.

- Mob action was accompanied by the re-imposition of stricter dress and behavioral codes during the late 13th century. Blue turbans were imposed after 1300 riots, as well as increase in the jizya and banning Copts from riding horses.

- Black clothes and turbans were imposed during the late 16th century, and blue during the mid 17th century, and black again in the late 17th century (along with having to wear bells around their neck and forbidding them from wearing woolen clothing).

- During the late 18th century, Copts were banned from using names used by Muslims and Coptic doctors were banned from examining Muslim patients.

- Mobs were given a free rein for a few days to terrorize Copts and loot their property (Mubarak and Morsi, is that you?).

- In 1300, it was proclaimed that whoever killed a Copt would claim that Copt’s wealth and churches were ordered closed.

- New taxes were imposed on Copts during the late 14th century.

- Mamluks would fire Coptic civil servants with every riot.