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Armanious Coptic family at  
their house in Jersey City  
Heights, NJ**

**March 2005**

**Research by Andrew Frenchman**

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Around 4 a.m. on Friday, January 14<sup>th</sup>, police officers, acting on a request by Ayman Garas, brother of the murdered mother, broke down the door of the two-story house on Oakland Avenue. It had been more than two days since anybody had seen or heard from them. Neither the father or mother had shown up for work on Wednesday, January 12<sup>th</sup>. (NY Times, 1/15/05).

The victims were: Hossam, 47, who worked as the banquet headwaiter for the Westin Princeton Hotel; Amal Garas, 37, who worked for the US Postal Service in Kearny; Sylvia, 15, was a sophomore at Dickinson High School; and, Monica, 8.

All four had crosses tattooed on their right wrists. But authorities said a slash near Sylvia's tattoo appeared to be a defensive wound, not a deliberate attack on the cross (NY DailyNews, 1/17/05)

The family immigrated from Luxor, Egypt to the US in 1997 and Hossam last traveled there in 2002.

## **LAW ENFORCEMENT & PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE ACCOUNTS:**

Five law enforcement agencies have been investigating this case: The Hudson County Prosecutor's Office, The Jersey City Police, The Federal Bureau of Investigation, The Immigration and Naturalization Service, and The Federal Office of Immigration and Customs. The lead on the case is the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office.

Gaetano T. Gregory, prosecutor with the Hudson County prosecutor's office, said that none of the crosses on the tattoos on the wrists of the family members had been slashed. He said that "there was no cash in the house". The autopsy revealed that all four had died from puncture wounds to their throats and necks. (NY Times, 1/17/05).

Prosecutors said on 1/16/05 that the killer or killers appeared to have taken all the money from the house, except for a single penny found on the floor. "The father's wallet had been emptied and his pockets had been turned out", said First Assistant Hudson County Prosecutor Guy Gregory. "Even the daughter's pocketbook was turned out". (NY DailyNews, 1/17/05).

Law enforcement authorities say they have found no evidence that religion motivated the killings, believing that theft or a vendetta are more likely. Money had been taken -- Armanious's wallet was empty, his pockets turned out -- but other valuables

remained. Hudson County Prosecutor Edward DeFazio said: "It could be a vendetta-type crime, based on something that previously occurred here, or goes back to Egypt," he said. "We haven't eliminated a sectarian religious motive, but we have no facts at this point that substantiate that theory." (Boston Globe, 2/6/05)

According to a January 18 statement by the Hudson County Prosecutor, evidence of robbery is present in the case: money was not found at the scene. [...] A pocketbook had been emptied and drawers had been rifled in the home. But, jewelry was present and a computer in the children's bedroom. No signs of desecration of religious artifacts were found. No messages concerning religion were left. (NY Sun, 2/7/05).

The results of the autopsies will not be released until March 14<sup>th</sup>. According the death certificates, the preliminary causes of death are "stab wounds to the throat". (NY Sun, 2/7/05). [Normally, it only takes 48 hours to get autopsy and toxicology reports back]

First Assistant Hudson County Prosecutor Guy Gregory confirmed that police have ruled out a dispute the family had with a former tenant as a possible motive (The Bergen Record, 1/16/05).

Hudson County Prosecutor Edward DeFazio said "The FBI does not think that, based on the information gleaned from the scene, it's base on religious extremism. The killers didn't bring the murder weapons to the house, killing the family instead with knives they found there. That doesn't indicate a planned assassination. The family was bound and silenced with duct tape that may or may not have been inside the house." One theory holds that the victims were significantly wealthier than their modest home indicated and the killers were trying to gain access to the hidden money. Although there was evidence of robbery, a large amount of jewelry remained untouched. Several religious symbols - including cross tattoos on each family member's wrist - weren't damaged. It is likely the killers spent "a considerable amount of time" in the house. The extent of Hossam's injuries suggests a substantial effort was expended, possibly to get financial information from him. He clearly suffered the worst of injuries, including numerous stab wounds. DeFazio insisted the injuries aren't consistent with those in ritualistic homicide. (North Jersey Media Group, 2/14/05).

DeFazio has also said that investigators have uncovered financial information about the family that may have played a role; that the knife used in the murder was likely one found in the household, meaning the attackers may not have come armed;

that there was no sign of struggle, speculating that the victims knew their attackers. (New Jersey Journal, 2/15/05).

DeFazio's most recent statement is: "Could it be a vendetta? Yes. Are we looking into that? Yes. Religious items in the victims' home were not desecrated, there was no mutilation of the bodies, and no religious message was left at the scene. We have more work to do, including on the computer angle, the financial profile and history of the family, including any information on the family or associated people in Egypt." (New Jersey Journal, 2/26/05).

The FBI is examining the bedroom computer of Sylvia and Monica, which prosecutors said was the only computer in the modest two-bedroom home. (North New Jersey Media Group, 2/1/05).

#### **COPTIC COMMUNITY'S REACTIONS:**

Coptic community leaders announced a \$100,000 reward for information leading to convictions in the murders. (NY DailyNews, 1/17/05)

Monir Dawoud, spokesman for the American Coptic Association, said "We do not have proof, but the crime was committed in a certain way, the way Muslim fanatics kill people" (NY DailyNews, 1/17/05).

Many Copts fear that New Jersey officials are caving in to pressure from Islamic lobby groups and the Egyptian government in order to "whitewash" this investigation (NY Sun, 2/7/05)

US Copts Association posted a statement on its website that said 'The Armanious family members are modern-day martyrs in Islamic fundamentalists' war on Christianity" (Boston Globe, 2/6/05).

According to Michael Meunier, the president of the U.S. Copts Association, who met with the prosecutor about the progress of the investigation: "The prosecutor told me that robbery was no longer the focus and acknowledged that this was the worst murder he has ever seen," Mr. Meunier said. "He told me he believes it was a vengeful crime." (NY Sun, 2/7/05)

At the February 15<sup>th</sup> National Press Club news conference, Meunier said that the family had a revolving credit line of \$50,000 but had to take out a home equity loan to pay it off. He said the money left over from the \$120,000 loan was deposited in a bank and it remains there. (New Jersey Journal, 2/16/05).

Meunier also stated "Why would you kill an 8 year old? Why would you drill them with a knife into their throats and stab them? It seemed like it was someone trying to make a symbolic gesture, to give them a message, or to get information from

them, a sort of lesson to the rest of the activist community" (New Jersey Journal, 2/15/05).

The St. Abraam's Coptic Orthodox Church in Woodbury, NY, issued a statement alleging that authorities deliberately aren't characterizing the slayings as hate crimes because of "political correctness". (North Jersey Media Group, 1/20/05).

The U.S. Copts Association and other Coptic organizations took out a full-page ad about the killings in the Washington Times, Tuesday, February 15<sup>th</sup>.

#### **FAMILY REACTIONS:**

According to New York Sun journalist Maria Sliwa (also of Freedom Now News), one family member who viewed the bodies at the funeral home before they were placed in closed caskets, told her that the necks of each of the victims were "slit" across the throat and that below the slits, holes, about the size of the thumb, were "drilled" or "twisted" into their throats. (NY Sun, 2/7/05)

Anies Garas, father of the mother, states: "The police have vouchered all of the jewelry. None of it was taken. In fact, my daughter was still wearing a ring worth \$3,500 after she was murdered." Mr. Garas says that though a small amount of money was taken, no valuables were removed from the house (NY Sun, 2/7/05).

At a February 15<sup>th</sup> National Press Club news conference, Amal's mother Ferail and her brother Ayman, brother in law Emad, aunt Wana, and uncles Emil, Gameel, Alphonse and Milad issued a statement saying: "The Armaniousses were not rich and lived modestly. The jewelry in the home was left intact. The family did not keep large amounts of cash in their home. If the primary motive was robbery, why would they have killed each person in such a cruel and vindictive manner?" (Newark Star-Ledger, 2/16/05)

Ayman Garas, the mother's brother said: "Do you think if Hossam had a lot of money he would have complained about his job not giving him enough hours? He never complained about money, but he wasn't rich" (North Jersey Media Group, 2/14/05).

Also, in their press conference, the family pointed out that no money or jewelry was taken from the Armanious home and there were no mysterious bank withdrawals during of after the murders. They called the murders "calculated, planned and professional" (North Jersey Media Group, 2/14/05).

**OTHER SOURCES:**

Hossam had been systematically tracked by a radical Islamic website, Barsomyat.com, which posted photographs and information about Christians who actively debate Muslims on the Internet chat service PalTalk.com. The website displayed a lamb with its throat being slit and a crucifix crossed out by a red "X".

(WorldNetDailydotcom, 2/1/05). The website, run by a Jordanian, was shut down by its Minnesota-base hosting company, after pictures of the Armanious husband and wife with comments that they "got what they deserved for their actions in America" were found (Forward, 2/11/05). One member of barsomyat.com wrote "they were slaughtered along with their children as a punishment from the heavens to those who curse the most divine of all who were created". (North Jersey Media Group, 2/1/05).

Hossam was a frequent PalTalk debater, under the user name "I love Jesus", allegedly received a death threat two months before the slayings from another PalTalk user. PalTalk is a New York City-based company founded in 1998 which uses instant voice and video messaging. (Forward, 2/11/05). Hossam had recently argued in a chat room with a Muslim, who felt he had insulted Islam, who reportedly threatened to kill him if he didn't take back his comments (WABC, 1/17/05).

Jersey City-WABC, reported that the slain family's cousin has been a translator working for the prosecution in the trial of Lynne Steward, the radical lawyer accused of smuggling messages from imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, to terrorist cell members and associates (WABC, 1/17/05). However, a Justice Department official said that the translator was a distant relative who had not seen the family in several years: "We

believe there is no connection between this person and the slaying". (NY Times, 1/18/05).

Fox News reported that the home was ransacked. (Fox News, AP, 2/14/05).

Joseph Farah, of WorldNetDailydotcom, speculates that since there were no signs of forced entry into the Armanious home, the murderers could have been let in because they might have been pretending to be curious about Christianity and possibly conversion (1/26/05).

The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) went on record asking police officials to investigate the possibility that the killings were motivated by "bias" (NY Sun, 2/7/05).