

THE BLOODY “PALM SUNDAY” IN EGYPT

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The Mary Girgis church in Tanta and Saint Mark's church in Alexandria were attacked on Sunday, April 9, 2017, as the Coptic Christian community celebrated Palm Sunday, one of the holiest days of the Christian calendar. The total number of casualties in the two attacks climbed to 47 dead and 126 injured, in the deadliest militant attack in Egypt against civilians in decades.¹

The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility, through their social media affiliate accounts, for Sunday's churches' explosions in Egypt in both Nile Delta's Tanta and the coastal city of Alexandria.² "Two Islamic State militants wearing suicide vests carried out the deadly church bombings in Egypt on Sunday that killed at least 44 people", the group said in a statement on Sunday that warned of future attacks.

The Alexandria bombing was carried out by an Islamic State militant it identified as Abu al-Baraa al-Masri, while the Tanta church bombing was carried out by an individual it named as abu Ishaq al-Masri.³

Abu al-Baraa al-Masri was born on December 13, 1974 in the town of Abu Tabel in Kafr El Sheikh. He has an industrial secondary school diploma, and he is married and has three children. Abu Ishaq al-Masri was born in September 1990 in Manyat Al Kamh. He holds a Bachelor Degree in Commerce. He worked as an accountant in Kuwait for four months then he traveled to Turkey then to Syria on December 26, 2013. He later returned to Sinai.⁴

Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church, sent his “deep condolences to my brother, Pope Tawadros II, the Coptic church and the entire dear Egyptian nation,” adding that he was praying for the dead and wounded.

Pope Francis will visit Egypt as planned on April 28 and 29, 2017, despite the bombings of two Coptic Christian churches, a Vatican official said. "Egypt has assured us that everything will go as well as possible, so we will go confidently," he said.⁵

Pope Francis will become the second Roman Catholic pope to visit Egypt, following John Paul II's historic trip there in February 2000.

The April 9, 2017 attack in Tanta

At least 27 were killed and 78 people were wounded in an explosion inside the Coptic church of Mary Girgis in the Egyptian Nile delta city of Tanta, on April 9, 2017.⁶ The explosion occurred as Christians across Egypt mark Palm Sunday at the start of the Week of Pain, which ends next Sunday with celebrations for the Resurrection of Christ. The explosive device was detonated by a suicide bomber in the church.⁷

The same Coptic Church was a target of a failed bomb attack. On March 29, 2017, security forces dismantled a bomb inside the Mary Girgis church, with no human or material losses reported.⁸

The April 9, attack in Alexandria

In an explosion at Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in the Manshiya district of Alexandria, 18 civilians and four police officers were killed and 40 injured. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt outside the church as the head of the church, Pope Tawadros II, led the service inside.⁹

Saint Mark's Cathedral is the historical seat of the Pope of Alexandria, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The response of the Egyptian government

Egypt's president Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi declared a state of emergency nationwide for three months, after attacks on two different Egyptian churches killed dozens and injured scores, in the deadliest recent attack against the country's Christians.¹⁰

According to Egypt's 2014 constitution, Article 154 stipulates that the Egyptian president can declare a state of emergency, in a manner regulated by law, after consultation with cabinet. However, any such proclamation must be submitted to parliament within the following seven days for their consideration. The declaration of a state of emergency must be approved by a majority of MPs.¹¹

Egypt's cabinet approved the decision to impose a nationwide state of emergency for three months starting 10 April at 1 pm. In a statement the cabinet explained the reasons for the move. "The state of emergency allows both the armed forces and the police to execute those procedures necessary to combat the threats of terrorism and its financing, maintain security around the country and protect public and private property, as well as preserving the lives of citizens," the statement read.¹²

A state of emergency can only be declared for a stated three-month period, after which it can only be extended with the approval of parliament.

El-Sisi had called a National Defense Council meeting. Chaired by the president and made up of the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, the defense minister and the commanders of the Egyptian armed forces, this was the second such meeting in five months convened in response to a deadly attack against Egyptian Christians.¹³

In an initial response, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi ordered military Special Forces to assist police in securing vital state facilities all over the country and ordered the opening of military hospitals to treat those injured in the attacks.¹⁴

Counter terrorist operation in Assiut

Egyptian security forces killed seven suspected ISIS militants in a shootout on April 10, 2017 as they were meeting to plan attacks on minority Christians, the Interior Ministry said. The incident in the southern city of Assiut occurred a day after Egypt's cabinet approved a three-month state of emergency in the wake of ISIS-claimed attacks on two Christian Coptic churches that killed at least 44 people. The seven militants were killed after they opened fire on security forces that approached them as they were meeting to plot further attacks on Christians, the ministry said in a statement. Assiut has a significant Christian population.¹⁵

The terror threat against the Copts in Egypt

The St Peter and St Paul churches bombing in Cairo

Twenty-nine people were killed and 49 wounded when a suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt in Cairo's Cathedral complex on December 11, 2016. The attack was carried out by a 22-year-old suicide bomber, named Mahmoud Shafiq Mohamed Mostafa.

On December 12, 2016, the Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the bombing at the St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. In a statement, the group said it was a suicide operation claiming it has killed and wounded 80 "crusaders." The statement also read that the attack was carried out by Abu Abdallah El-Masri who detonated a suicide belt.

The terror attacks against Copts in Sinai

A spate of jihadist-linked attacks in El Arish in North Sinai Peninsula have led some Coptic families to flee their homes. Eight terrorist attacks have targeted Christians in North Sinai, killing members of the Christian community.¹⁶ Seven Christians have been killed in El- Arish between January 30 and February 24, 2017. ISIS claimed responsibility for the killings, five of which were shootings, one man was beheaded and another set on fire.¹⁷

The Islamic State group released a video vowing to carry out attacks against the Christian community in Egypt and promising to "liberate Cairo."¹⁸ It described the Coptic Christian minority as "infidels" empowering the West against Muslims. The 20-minute video titled "Fight All Idolaters" also purportedly shows the last statements made by the suicide bomber who blew himself up in Cairo's St. Peter and St. Paul's Church on December 11, 2016.¹⁹

The assassinations stoked panic among Christians and have sent hundreds of Christians fleeing Sinai to the city of Ismailia on the Suez Canal. The families have been housed in youth ministry hostels in Ismailia as well as at the Anglican Church, and basic needs such as food have already been provided.

Christians in northern Sinai have been fleeing in waves over recent years because of militant threats, and the community that before 2011 numbered up to 5,000 people has now dwindled to fewer than 1,000.²⁰

The Christians in the Middle East

The Middle East is the birthplace of Christianity but as a result of years of persecution and discrimination, especially in the past decade, Christians now constitute no more than 3-4% of the region's population, down from 20% a century ago.

In Iraq with the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Christians began to leave Iraq in large numbers, and the population shrank to less than 300,000 today from as many as 1.5 million in 2003.

Since the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Assad has allowed Christians to leave the country. Nearly a third of Syria's Christians, about 600,000, have found themselves with no choice but to flee the country, driven out by extremist groups like the Nusra Front and now ISIS.

The rise of Islamic extremism and mainly the Islamic state (ISIS) are the driving force behind religious violence against minorities. ISIS is looking to eradicate Christians and other minorities in territories under its control. ISIS claims to offer Christians in some areas of its self-proclaimed caliphate an option to pay a traditional Islamic tax, or jizya, as an alternative to death, deportation, and forcible conversion. Superficially, ISIS may appear to have revived the medieval Islamic practice that provided limited toleration for the Jewish and Christian "People of the Book" and that was formally abandoned over a century and a half ago under the last Ottoman caliphate. Closer examination of all three cases where jizya was claimed to have been offered as an option, however, reveals that these ISIS claims are a deception or propaganda ploy. ISIS does not tolerate Christians.²¹

Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians in Libya captured by the Islamic state local branch were marched onto the beach and beheaded.

Egypt is the Middle Eastern country with the largest share of Christians (about 10% of the 90 million populations). Egypt's Copts are one of the most ancient Christian communities and the largest in the Middle East.

Summary

The bombings in Tanta and Alexandria are the latest in a series of assaults on Egypt's Christian minority, which makes up around 10 percent of the population and has been repeatedly targeted by armed groups.²²

The recent terror attacks raised concerns on whether authorities were prepared to secure the churches as Christians across Egypt mark Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week, which concludes with Easter Sunday on 16 April, during which Christians celebrate the Resurrection.

There are several reasons for the escalation in the attacks against the Copts in Egypt:

- Jihadists and Islamists accuse the Copts of supporting the military overthrow of Islamist president Mohammed Morsi in 2013, which ushered in a deadly crackdown on his supporters.
- Parliament speaker Ali Abdel-Aal said the group that claimed responsibility for the two attacks is a barbaric movement that aims to distort the face of Islam and spread chaos and bloodbaths in all of Egypt. "These two terrorist attacks, in addition to the one that hit the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo last December, are part of a grand conspiracy that aims to destabilize Egypt and disrupt its strong national unity," said Abdel-Aal.²³
- Militants have suffered consecutive security hits in recent months. In March 2017, the founder of IS-affiliated group Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis, Salem Salma El-Hamdeen, also known as Abu Anas El-Ansari, was killed by Egypt's armed forces in an airstrike. The military also announced recently that it had taken full control of the Mount Halal area, which was considered one of the key centers of terrorist activity in Sinai. The IS group could be trying to retaliate and compensate for its latest losses in Sinai, targeting the Copt minority.
- The IS group in Iraq and in Syria and Iraq suffered heavy losses and try to present achievements in other places including Egypt. The attacks on the Copt churches can be a message to show how the group is expanding in Egypt with different targets from Cairo to Sinai and Alexandria to Tanta.

Insurgent attacks in Egypt have intensified since a 2013 military coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi, the democratically elected leader of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood party. Attacks against security forces have become common in recent years but are largely concentrated in Sinai, where Egypt's army and police are battling an entrenched Islamist insurgency.

The Islamic insurgency in Egypt is far from being over and the Egyptian government is unlikely to end its crackdown on the Brotherhood, IS and other Islamist groups, anytime soon.

The Christian world failed to protect the Christian minorities in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Libya). In Egypt the regime is ready to make all the efforts to protect the local Christian population. Despite ongoing political and human rights problems in Egypt, the United States and other countries should support Egypt's counter-terrorism campaign and Egypt's internal counter-terrorism struggle should be seen as part of the regional and global effort against the threat posed by Islamic terror.

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