



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The April, 2017 Attacks on Egyptian Churches: ISIL Victimizes an Egyptian Religious Community

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Apr 2017

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Introduction

A series of coordinated terrorist attacks struck Coptic Orthodox churches across Egypt on April 9, celebrated as Palm Sunday. The first bombing, at the Mar Jirjis ("St. George") Church in the Nile Delta town of Tanta, accounted for the majority of victims. In Alexandria, Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church Tawadoros II survived a suicide bombing that targeted St. Mark's Cathedral where the Patriarch was leading a special mass, though 50 were killed and 150 wounded. Egyptian security services also indicate that a car bomb was defused in the vicinity of St. Mark's before it could be detonated. A blast would have significantly increased the impact of the attack. A group calling itself the 'Egyptian Islamic State,' an affiliate of ISIL, claimed through its media channel to have carried out the attacks, promising to deliver even further blows to Egypt's already embattled Coptic Christian community. 'Egyptian Islamic State' had previously acknowledged an attack on the St. Mark's Cathedral of Cairo in December 2016, which had killed 25 parishioners.

Security Shortcomings and Denunciations

Public outrage amongst Coptic Egyptians appeared swiftly, born of the sense of a massive shortcoming on the part of the nation's police, particularly in the town of Tanta, where only 10 days prior a car bomb had been defused outside of the same church. The ability of terrorists to strike with impunity leaves open to question the ability and willingness of Egypt's security services to deal with a clear problem.

A number of political blocs within Egypt have objected to the way that the present crisis is being handled by the security establishment, in efforts spearheaded by the Egyptian Armed Forces. Egyptian politicians have condemned the Ministry of Interior and the Army as apathetic and incompetent. A number of Egyptian political figures have demanded the resignation of senior figures in the country's security establishment, most notably Interior Minister Magdy Abdelghaffar. Mainstream political Islamists were quick to condemn the attack itself, including both the Salafist Nour Party, allied to the regime, and the Justice and Development Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a proscribed organization since the Egyptian coup of 2013. In a statement

released by the JDP, the group mourned the victims of the attacks and held the Sisi regime ultimately responsible for “spilling the blood of Egyptians.”

For his part, President Abdelfattah al-Sisi convened a meeting of the National Defense Council before announcing to the media that a “state of emergency” would be rolled out across the country for a period of three months. With vital sites under direct military control, the Sisi regime further announced the formation of a “Higher Committee to Combat Extremism.”

A Question of Coptic Specificity

To understand the logic of targeting Coptic Christians in Egypt, four main issues must be delineated:

- The established tradition of social and political discrimination against Egyptian Copts, inherited by successive waves of the central, authoritarian state in Egypt
- Sectarian agitation, exacerbated by both religious and political groups in Egypt
- Heightened state of political polarization across Egyptian society since the Revolution of January, 2011 and which led to a small number of limited acts of violence. These developed into more complex waves of retribution in the wake of the June 30, 2013 coup, leading to events in which Coptic Egyptians were victimized for the acquiescence of the Coptic clergy with the coup. Notably, there were no attacks on mosques, despite the fact that the Islamic institution of al-Azhar, a centuries-old religious endowment under state control, was fully complicit with the coup which removed Egypt’s elected president
- ISIL activities have targeted Christian communities in all Arab countries it acts within. While this agitation has also engulfed political Islamists opposed to the group as well as a number of Muslim religious movements, an established tradition of Islamic theology has allowed them to target non-Muslims, specifically Christians, with impunity

When it comes to ISIL, when explaining targeting of Egypt’s Copts, the Islamic State alludes cryptically to far-removed historical events. Communiqués by ISIL’s Egyptian

affiliate adopt terms to describe the community such as “Crusaders” and “Franks,” though they are referring to Egyptian citizens. Statements issued by the group urging attacks on state institutions in Egypt—including the judiciary, the security services and military forces—never fail to ask Islamic State supporters in Egypt to take up arms against Egypt’s Christian citizens indiscriminately. In doing this, the group is able to capitalize on a widespread populist sentiment that casts Copts in a hateful light and which depicts Egypt’s Christian community as having hegemonic power over the country’s economy and media landscape. Rooted in the experiences of selected individual Coptic businessmen, these sentiments are used to sanction a holy war against the “enemies of the religion of God,” as ISIL has described the minority community. In the imaginary world developed by ISIL, Egypt’s Coptic Christian community, and Christian communities in the Eastern Mediterranean more broadly, are at the forefront of a global effort led by the United States of America to do battle with Islam. Ironically, Egypt’s Copts are an indigenous community that makes up part of the national fabric of Egypt, while ISIL is the true “minority” in this case, and remains a foreign import. Nonetheless, the group is able to employ a rhetorical strategy that licenses the killing of Copts and the appropriation of their assets. In its unwillingness to adopt a discourse of coexistence across a diverse Egyptian society, ISIL has even distanced itself from mainstream political Islamists.

The mentality adopted by ISIL and its Egyptian affiliate transcends the boundaries of nation, homeland and citizenship, replacing them with religious divisions that pay no attention to borders and plants the seeds of sectarian discord globally. History has demonstrated that such a mindset will not only weaken pluralist societies, but will also pave the way for internal divisions within a single cultural group or religious confession.

Reverberations across the Eastern Mediterranean

The apparent level of coordination in the near-simultaneous attacks on April 9 broadcast ISIL’s message to the world: its networks of power and ability to strike at will remain robust, even in the face of numerous setbacks. However, an examination of the events of April 9 does not reveal any considerable evidence that ISIL has managed to move its operations into Egypt. Firstly, the attacks did not differ in terms of planning

sophistication, weapons used or tactics adopted by the attackers compared with earlier events: there is no indication that ISIL has moved its cadres to the country.

The group has thus far also failed to successfully export its model of intra-sectarian hatred into Egypt, which it has more successfully employed in Iraq and Syria. In this sense, Egypt differs from other countries where Islamic State is active. Unlike Iraq, where it has benefited from a Sunni-Shia divide, and Syria, where a division across political has sectarian ramifications, Egypt—with the exception of some isolated areas in the Sinai Peninsula—has thus far remained impervious to implanted sectarian hatred.

International Aspects of an anti-Coptic Campaign

More significantly, perhaps, is that in Egypt, ISIL does not hold territory. Unlike its operations in Iraq and Syria, Egyptian Islamic State works primarily to prevent the stabilization, and normalization, of the Sisi regime, and feeds off popular anger. The consequences of its terrorist actions, however, have had the entirely opposite effect: the Egyptian public has become increasingly attached to greater stability, while the regime has also managed to depict itself to world powers as the champion of religious minorities in the face of extremists.

Islamic State rhetoric against Egypt's Coptic community also features as part of the group's strategy of competition with other Islamist groups. By focusing on the connections between the Coptic clergy and the counter-revolutionary regime presently in power in Egypt, the ISIL affiliate is looking to build inroads into the rank-and-file of myriad Islamist political groups that entered the political fray in Egypt *en masse* following the toppling of Mubarak—and which had quickly clashed with the Coptic Church during Egypt's short-lived period of democracy. In other words, Egypt's Coptic Christians are being targeted as retribution for the 2013 coup.

The fanning of sectarian tensions is a centuries-old phenomenon in Egypt. What defines this present stage is the attempt to politically exploit the sharp political divisions that exist in the wake of the coup, and specifically the desire to win over segments of the Islamist grassroots who do not subscribe to ISIL's ideology—for example disenchanting

members of the Muslim Brotherhood who have been increasingly oppressed and marginalized in the wake of the ouster of Mohammed Morsi. These attempts have resonated with certain ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood who hold Tawadoros II personally culpable for the June, 2013 coup.

Here, the Copts seem to be a soft target, since al-Azhar as well as Egypt's political Salafists also backed the coup. Notably, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the body that orchestrated the ouster of Egypt's first democratically elected president, does not include a single Copt. Indeed, Muslims account for the vast majority not only of Egypt's population as a whole, but also of businessmen and the owners of the nation's media, not to mention the crowds who joined the mass public protests that effectively toppled Morsi on 30 June.

While in many ways unique to Egypt, the ramifications of Egyptian Islamic State's campaign against the Copts have had regional repercussions. A video released by ISIL on 15 February 2015, depicted 21 Coptic Egyptian hostages in Libya; the laborers' throats were slit. The executions made no sense in a country like Libya, where Muslim-Christian tensions simply did not exist. The act did precipitate Egyptian airstrikes on Islamic State outposts in the Libyan city of Sirte where the crime took place.

Repeated attacks on Coptic Christian places of worship in Tanta and Alexandria, as well as an attack on the Coptic Patriarchate in the Cairo neighborhood of Abbasiya, were all part of a strategy declared earlier by the Islamic State. They form part of a pattern first seen with the attacks on Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation Church in 2010, continuing onto the terrorization of Coptic citizens of the city of Arish in the Sinai Peninsula during a campaign between January and February, 2017. This period witnessed the murder of seven Egyptian Christians, forcing approximately 100 Christian families to flee from the area. The seeming inability of Egypt's security establishment to put an end to these events angered many within the Coptic community. Many questioned the competence of their country's police and armed forces.

The Sisi Regime Capitalizes on a Terror Campaign

Egyptian Islamic State's anti-Copt campaign has created an uncertainty threatening negative consequences for the Egyptian economy, particularly in the vital sectors of tourism and foreign investment. However, and even more crucially, the Egyptian Islamic State remains a tacit ally of tyranny and counter-revolutionary forces that the Sisi regime has been able to exploit to bolster its own domestic legitimacy. It has done this by using action against the group to strengthen relations with foreign powers, which suffered since the 2013 coup. In fact, the Egyptian regime has been able to present itself to the world as a vital partner in the face of terrorism. Equally, such developments allow Western powers, long reluctant to openly embrace Sisi because of his regime's human rights violations, to warm up to the leader, justifying relations on the grounds of a mutual project of fighting terrorism. Thus, anti-Coptic violence and violence on the part of Jihadists have served to strengthen relations between Western powers and tyrannical regimes, which have long been based on security-related concerns.

Conclusion

Wide-scale Christian emigration has been a prominent feature of both Syria and Iraq over the last half-century. This is the result of an accumulation of a number of factors, beginning with the policies of the Baath governments in both of these countries. Emigration continued during the period of radical violence against Christian communities in Iraq, and culminated in the wholesale displacement of Christian communities by ISIL over the last few years. Today, ISIL appears to be planning a similar, deliberate and forced expulsion of Christians from Egypt.

Alongside the immeasurable human suffering these plans are already inflicting, their success would spell the end of the rich diversity that has typified the Greater Levant for centuries. It demands firm action on the part of the region as a whole, to prevent the success of ISIL and other violent groups which seek to turn religious differences into sources of conflict.

Attempts to escape reality by blaming such attacks on foreign conspiracies or on black-flag operations by Arab regimes do a disservice to those fighting for justice, freedom, and human rights. Opposition to the oppressive regimes of the region must not obscure the need to battle another, grassroots force opposed to freedom, equality, and justice by victimizing persons who belong to minority religious or ideological groups. In fact, the present predicament is much more complex, and more pressing, than a conspiracy: it is a political, cultural, and social challenge the entire Arab region needs to face.