



# Egypt: A Church under siege - Egyptian Christians and IS

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## Introduction

The Church in Egypt is one of the oldest in the world and is believed to have been founded by St. Mark just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its important place in church history as one of the earliest Christian communities that goes all the way back to the first century AD, the Church in Egypt (which now consists of a variety of denominations) has a special significance in the contemporary Christian landscape due to the fact that it is the largest Christian community in the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> The Church in Egypt has faced existential threats for most of its history.<sup>3</sup> While these threats have had various waves of intensity over the years, they have always been present. A series of violent attacks against Egyptian Christians since December 2016 by the group known as Islamic State indicates that this persecution still persists through to the present day. Taking this into account, this article seeks to draw attention to the threats faced by Egyptian Christians and to emphasize the need for support for this Christian community under siege.

## 1. Violent attacks against Egyptian Christians

Since the 7th century Christians have often been relegated to second-class status within Egypt and have faced varying levels of violent persecution.<sup>4</sup> With the establishment and rise of radical

<sup>1</sup> See Partrick, Theodore H., *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church*, Fisher Park Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Brown, Scott K., *The Coptic Church in Egypt: A Comment on Protecting Religious Minorities from Non-state Discrimination*, *BYU L. Rev.* (2000): 1049.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Islamic groups, especially in the second half of the 20th century, Egyptian Christians have continued to face renewed risks of violent persecution. The 1970's and 1990's are often mentioned as decades in which the killing of Christians by Islamic militants were particularly visible.<sup>5</sup> Although the Arab Spring uprisings had given rise to some optimism in 2011 about the prospect of equality and the full inclusion of Christians in society, these hopes have proved to be unfounded and naïve.

Since the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings and the turbulence they brought to the Arab world, the Egyptian Church seems to be facing a serious and, one might even say, existential threat. The last four years (2013-2017) have been particularly difficult and deadly for Egyptian Christians with a significant spike in the number of violent attacks by radical Islamic groups. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Christians have only been killed by fanatic Islamic militants. In October 2011, for instance, 28 Christians were killed in Cairo when the army tried to disperse Christians protesting about the government's failure to protect churches against attacks.<sup>6</sup>

Some attribute the upsurge of violence since the Arab Spring to the fact that "many of the country's jihadists, held captive under former President Hosni Mubarak, were freed during the revolution that led to his ouster in 2011".<sup>7</sup> Another explanation for the rise of attacks against Christians, particularly since 2013, points to the Coptic Orthodox Church's support for President Morsi's removal from power.<sup>8</sup> When President Morsi, who had the backing of the Muslim Brotherhood, was ousted from office by the army, the Coptic Orthodox Church endorsed this move. Some of the attacks against Christians in Egypt since 2013 appear to have been a backlash against this perceived support.

Highlighting the growing level of violence against Christians in the past few years, Pope Tawadros of the Coptic Orthodox Church pointed out that violent attacks against Christians have been occurring with a frequency of nearly one attack per month over the past three years.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, there have been at least 77 documented instances of violent attacks on Coptic Christians between 2011 and 2016 in one governorate alone.<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch reported that in 2013 at least 42 churches and other Christian organizations were subjected to attacks with their buildings being burned and damaged.<sup>11</sup> Others reported that 52 churches and church affiliated institutions were attacked

<sup>5</sup> AP Explains: Who are Egypt's Coptic Christians, available at <http://www.therepublic.com/2017/05/27/ml-ap-explains-egypts-coptic-christians/>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Egypt: Don't Cover Up Military Killing of Copt Protesters, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/25/egypt-dont-cover-military-killing-copt-protesters>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Assessing the Jihadist Threat in Egypt: The Sinai Peninsula Analysis JUNE 29, 2016, available at <https://www.stratfor.com/article/assessing-jihadist-threat-egypt-sinai-peninsula>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Egypt's Coptic Christians have been badly let down – again, by Monique El-Faizy, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/10/opinions/egypt-coptic-christians-sisi-opinion/index.html>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. This could also be evidenced by the fact that, according to the Open Doors Analytical Violent Incident Database, between January 2013 and January 2017, there have been 367 separate violent incidents in which Christians have been attacked in Egypt.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Egypt: Mass Attacks on Churches Christians Say Pleas for Protection Fell Largely on Deaf Ears, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/21/egypt-mass-attacks-churches>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

within a period of twenty four hours.<sup>12</sup> These reports also indicate that homes and business owned by churches were also subjected to attacks in August 2013.<sup>13</sup>

After a lull in violence since the summer of 2013, another spate of violence against Christians started towards the end of 2016. For instance, in December 2016 a bomb attack against a chapel adjoining St. Mark's Cathedral of Cairo<sup>14</sup> during a Sunday service resulted in the death of 29 Christians while 49 sustained injuries<sup>15</sup>. The attack was particularly shocking due to the fact that St. Mark's Cathedral is the largest church complex in Egypt and the seat of the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. In February 2017, Egyptian Christians were forced to flee the North Sinai Governorate as a result of violent attacks by Islamic militants affiliated with IS who singled out seven Christians as their targets in separate attacks. Although no group claimed responsibility for these attacks, it is believed that a militant group affiliated with IS (and which released a video vowing to increase its attacks against Christians) was behind the murders.

Although they did not received the same amount of press coverage in the international media as the killings in Sinai, there have also been killings targeting Christians in Cairo and Alexandria in 2017. For instance, World Watch Monitor reported that five Coptic Christians were killed within a span of two weeks in Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>16</sup> The victims were killed by slitting their throats and in all instances valuables in their possession were left behind indicating that the motive for the killings was not robbery. The report indicates that at least one of the victims, Youssef Lamei, received threats from Salafist Muslims before the attack.<sup>17</sup>

In April 2017, in one of the most gruesome and deadliest attacks against Christians, 45 people were killed and 78 injured when two Coptic orthodox churches were bombed on Palm Sunday.<sup>18</sup> One of the attacks occurred inside a Coptic church in the northern city of Tanta and resulted in the death of 28 people during worship. The other attack occurred in Alexandria when a suicide bomber trying to gain entry to a Coptic church-service blew himself up at the entrance and killed 17 people.<sup>19</sup> IS claimed responsibility for these attacks.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of writing, the latest attack by IS took place on 26 May 2017 in which 29 Christians were killed and 23 were injured.<sup>21</sup> The victims were Christians who were traveling to a monastery in the Minya governorate south of Cairo. In this attack (for which IS has taken responsibility), the

<sup>12</sup> 'Horrible': Christian churches across Egypt stormed, torched, by Sarah Sirgany and Laura Smith-Spark, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/15/world/middleeast/egypt-church-attacks/>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Cairo bombing: Cairo Coptic Christian complex hit 11 December 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38280627>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Egypt: three days of mourning declared after 25 people killed in Cairo bomb, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/11/egypt-bomb-blast-cairo-cathedral>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Fourth Coptic Christian murdered in 10 days, available at <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/01/fourth-coptic-christian-murdered-in-10-days/>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> ISIS claims responsibility for Palm Sunday church bombings in Egypt, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/09/middleeast/egypt-church-explosion/index.html>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gunmen in Egypt Force Coptic Christian Pilgrims From Buses and Kill 28, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/middleeast/egypt-coptic-christian-attack.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

assailants ambushed the buses heading for the monastery.<sup>22</sup> According to eye-witnesses: “As many as 10 masked attackers in three SUVs stormed the bus dressed in military uniforms and demanded that the passengers recite the Muslim profession of faith, witnesses said. Then, the gunmen opened fire.”<sup>23</sup>

## 2. The Islamist insurgency and IS in Sinai

As has been pointed out in the earlier section of this report, for most of the attacks mentioned, IS in the Sinai has claimed responsibility. The IS affiliate in Egypt, also known as the Sinai Province group, is considered to be the most active and dangerous jihadist group in the country.<sup>24</sup> Before it changed its name to Sinai Province and pledged allegiance to IS in 2014, the group was called Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem) and it is believed that it has been active in the Sinai region since 2011.<sup>25</sup> The group operated initially mainly in the Sinai region and targeted security checkpoints and army personnel in the area.<sup>26</sup> Recruiting from the local Bedouin population of the Sinai who are angry at the government’s neglect of the region as well as their perceived marginalization, the Sinai Province group is believed to have as many as 1,500 active members.<sup>27</sup>

Since the end of 2016, there seems to have been a clear shift in the strategy and focus of the group. Initially the group’s objective was apparently to drive out the security forces of the Egyptian state from the sparsely populated northern Sinai with the aim of turning it into a province of IS. However, since December 2016, Egyptian Christians now seem to be the main target of the group. In fact, in the video in which IS claimed responsibility for one of the attacks, IS described Christians as its “favorite prey” and called on its supporters to attack Christians across the country.<sup>28</sup> Some analysts suggest that this shift in strategy is due to the losses IS has incurred in other parts of the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> According to these experts, IS is trying to establish a new front as it is losing ground in Libya, Iraq and Syria.<sup>30</sup> According to one analyst: “As the

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Coptic Christian attack: 10 of the 29 dead ID'd as children heading to monastery to pray, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/05/27/coptic-christian-attack-10-29-dead-idd-as-children-heading-to-monastery-to-pray.html>, accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Sinai Province: Egypt's most dangerous group, available at, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25882504>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>25</sup> The Islamic State - Sinai Province, Available at <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/557>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>26</sup> A dozen Egyptian troops killed in checkpoint attack, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/egypt-troops-killed-sinai-checkpoint-attack-161014112506956.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017; see also Gunmen Target Military Checkpoints Egypt's Sinai, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/gunmen-kill-fifteen-and-two-civilians-in-egypt-sinai/2703801.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Sinai Province: Egypt's most dangerous group, available at, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25882504>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Coptic Christians: Islamic State's 'Favorite Prey', available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/opinion/coptic-christians-islamic-states-favorite-prey.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Why ISIS Declared War on Egypt's Christians, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/why-isis-declared-war-on-egypts-christians/522453/>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Attacks Show ISIS' New Plan: Divide Egypt by Killing Christians, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/world/middleeast/egypt-christians-isis-palm-sunday-attacks-sisi.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

Islamic State comes under pressure in Iraq and Syria, it has to show movement on other fronts ... One of them is to demonstrate that it is still fighting a sectarian war.”<sup>31</sup>

As part of its effort to turn Egypt into its next battleground, IS seems to be intent on fomenting a religious conflict and destabilizing Egypt. Some have expressed concern that the recent spate of attacks by IS could inspire similar attacks by radicals throughout the country even if they are not formally affiliated with IS. Commenting on the possibility that extremists inspired by IS could start a violent attack and attempt to drive out Christians, an Egyptian human rights researcher has observed: “It could easily happen in small villages because the attacks will be seen to have achieved their aim in Arish”.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in all likelihood IS is going to continue attacking Christians in a very violent fashion. Some reports indicate that the group has established a network of cells in major Egyptian cities.<sup>33</sup> In its own public statements, IS has made it clear that it intends to keep up its attacks against Christians without relenting and that it would like its supporters and sympathizers to carry out similar attacks against Christians.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Egyptian government has been trying to suppress the insurgency in northern Sinai and defeat IS there, so far these efforts do not seem to have been particularly successful. The government has been carrying out an intensive military campaign called Operation Right of the Martyr since September 2015.<sup>35</sup> It also declared a state of emergency after the Palm Sunday attacks on the churches in Alexandria and Tanta.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, after the attack on Christians traveling to a monastery on 26 May 2017 in the Miniya Governorate, the government has conducted air raids in Libya on what the Egyptian government said were camps used by jihadists for training.<sup>37</sup> However, security experts have noted that the Egyptian authorities have not been successful “... in penetrating the new Islamist cells that threaten Egypt’s cities — or, at least, in stopping them from carrying out coordinated attacks on churches”.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Targeted by ISIS, Egyptian Christians Flee Violence, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/world/middleeast/egypt-coptic-christians-sinai.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Isis attacks drive Egyptian Christians from Sinai city, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/ab845e18-fcec-11e6-8d8e-a5e3738f9ae4>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Attacks Show ISIS’ New Plan: Divide Egypt by Killing Christians, Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/world/middleeast/egypt-christians-isis-palm-sunday-attacks-sisi.html>, last accessed on 6 June 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Egypt is failing to stop the insurgency in Sinai, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21720310-other-front-war-against-islamic-state-egypt-failing-stop>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Egypt Cabinet OKs state of emergency after Palm Sunday church bombings, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/10/middleeast/egypt-church-explosion/index.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Egypt launches air raids on Libya after 28 Christians killed by gunmen, available at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/gunmen-kill-28-christians-on-road-to-monastery-in-egypt/article35122523/>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Attacks Show ISIS’ New Plan: Divide Egypt by Killing Christians, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/world/middleeast/egypt-christians-isis-palm-sunday-attacks-sisi.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

### 3. Voices from Egypt <sup>39</sup>

According to Egyptian Christians who were interviewed for this report, the recent spate of violence (since December 2016) has to be seen in a wider context, taking into account the fact that antagonism towards Christians and the persecution of Christians is not something that only a small group of radical Islamists engage in. Several Christian leaders have pointed out that these widely reported violent attacks are taking place within a context where Christians are treated as second-class citizens and subjected to various forms of persecution in their everyday life. They also underscored the fact that the spread of intolerant and extremist teaching within mosques (and even in some of the most respected institutions of Islamic higher learning such as the Al-Azhar University) is exacerbating the problem. Thus the recent violent attacks can perhaps be seen as a more extreme and deadly expression of the general intolerance and fanaticism that pervade large segments of Egyptian society.

On this issue, one Egyptian pastor observed: “It is society at large and not just the militants. The pressure is in the wider society among neighbors, colleagues, classmates. Christians are seen as inferiors, infidels, blasphemers and are often excluded and discriminated [against].” Such deeply rooted anti-Christian prejudices and intolerant attitudes seem to be prevalent in society and are manifested in various ways. For instance, one pastor recalls an incident in which a Salafist came and locked the door of a newly opened church with a set of chains. The pastor states: “The police were not willing to do anything and the church has been closed for a whole year.” Such forms of persecution by ordinary citizens provide the context in which the more violent forms of persecution occur. Underscoring that the more violent incidents do not occur in a vacuum, one Christian leader notes that “the culture of society at large is intolerant and discriminatory”. Another Christian worker notes that the teaching of the Islamic “Kafir” doctrine encourages intolerant behavior and even violence against Christians. Another leader of a Christian ministry observes that the persecution of Christians has got worse since the 1970s, a time when fanatic Islamists “were given freedom and platform, access to the media enabling them to become thought leaders in society. Since then the attitude of mutual tolerance has been eroded.”

Almost all of those who were interviewed also agree that the problem of Christian persecution is more prevalent in rural areas as opposed to major cities like Cairo or Alexandria. Many attribute this to socio-economic conditions such as unemployment and lack of education. In parts of the country where there are limited opportunities for education and employment, such as Upper Egypt, society seems to be more susceptible to the rhetoric of radical imams who preach intolerance and even violence against Christians. The fact that such remote parts of the country are less governable, i.e. relatively less amenable to governmental control and authority, also means that they provide a conducive environment for fanatical teachers to encourage the persecution of Christians without much hindrance.

The Christian leaders interviewed for this report also emphasized that the forgiveness and love that has been manifested by Christians in the aftermath of the recent horrific attacks such as the the Palm Sunday attacks in April 2017, has created a very positive impression among many Egyptians. Underscoring the importance of such a response, one leader said: “We need to

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<sup>39</sup> This section is based on interviews with more than ten leaders of various Egyptian churches and Christian ministries conducted by the author in the period 22-25 May 2017. The identities of the Christians interviewed are not provided here for security reasons.

respond to hatred with love because that is what Jesus taught us. The weapons of the Church are love, mercy and forgiveness.” In addition to demonstrating forgiveness and love, Egyptian churches are responding to the rise in persecution with a focus on prayer. Another leader pointed out that “some churches are preaching love and reaching out to radical Muslims in poor areas of the country helping them out in action. They are helping the poor with a spirit of love ... making a difference in the provision of education and health services.” A pastor interviewed for the report said that “... churches are focusing on prayer. There is a movement of prayer, not just collectively but individually”. While many leaders have pointed to prayer as one of the ways in which Christians in Egypt are responding to the violence, the leaders have also pointed out that there are many Christians who are frustrated, angry and confused. The leaders have also pointed out that many Christians who have the possibility of leaving the country are considering emigration. The leaders have also noted that the teaching and history of the Coptic Orthodox Church that emphasizes martyrdom has proved to be a source of strength and courage for many Christians.

As far as the response of the government of Egypt is concerned, most of the church and ministry leaders interviewed were of the opinion that, although the government has tried to tackle the Islamic insurgency and has expressed its intention to provide greater security for Christians, there is a lot more that needs to be done. The leaders value the government’s effort to provide shelter and some material assistance to the Christians displaced from Sinai and also President al-Sisi’s strong statements denouncing “fanaticism and extremism” in Islam and affirming the right of Christian Egyptians to live without fear.<sup>40</sup> However, there is also frustration with the level of security and support the government has provided. Some Christian leaders also wonder whether the government really is in a position to address the real causes of the problem and root out radicalism. For instance, President al-Sisi has called upon Islamic leaders to teach tolerance and moderation and his administration has also indicated its intention to put measures in place to combat religious fanaticism. However, some Christian leaders have expressed reservations as to the extent to which such measures will be effective, particularly given how deeply rooted the anti-Christian prejudices and intolerant attitudes in Egyptian society are.

Commenting on how Christians outside of Egypt could express support for the Church in Egypt, the leaders interviewed for this report stated that more than anything they need the prayers of Christians all over the world. The leaders have also expressed their view that Christians in other parts of the world could also provide material support, particularly for Christians who have been displaced from northern Sinai. When it comes to advocacy, some Christian leaders have expressed reservations. Foreign advocacy has the potential to reinforce the tendency of some Egyptians to perceive Christians as being more aligned with Western powers than the Egyptian state. Therefore, the Christians interviewed expressed the need for caution and tact in advocacy campaigns that are intended to advance the cause of persecuted Egyptians. However, with this caveat, most of the leaders seem to agree that advocacy on behalf of Egyptian Christians is one of the ways in which the Christians and churches all over the world could manifest their solidarity with and support for the Egyptian Church.

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<sup>40</sup> See: Sisi calls for religious reforms against 'extremists', available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/sisi-calls-religious-reforms-extremists-160629181523576.html>, last accessed 6 June 2017.

Commenting on the future prospects for Egyptian churches and Christians, the church leaders interviewed for the report believe that a dramatic improvement in the situation is unlikely. While some leaders fear that the situation is likely to get worse, others think that the situation will more or less remain as it is for the foreseeable future. Commenting on what lies ahead for Egyptian Christians, one stated: "I think God is trying to teach us something and bring unity to strengthen us. I think we will face more persecution. We need unity and prayer ... the persecution is only beginning." Another leader concluded: "Things are likely to continue as they are. There could be a slight improvement but not much. The problem is deeply rooted and for there to be change, there needs to be a concerted and consistent effort. This would take lots of time. We need to change minds, attitudes and beliefs ... I do not see a remarkable change on the horizon."

## Conclusion

As one can infer from the discussion above, Egyptian Christians are going through a turbulent and difficult time in which they are facing a determined, hostile and violent enemy that is intent on staging horrific and cruel attacks against them. Such attacks are occurring within a context where daily life for Egyptian Christians means facing regular discrimination and pressure from society at large because of their faith. Although the administration of President al-Sisi has signaled its intention to improve the overall situation of Christians and ensure their security and rights as citizens, delivering on these promises has proved to be much more difficult than making them. Facing such trials and persecution, Egyptian Christians are showing a great deal of resilience and courage in loving back those who hate them. To strengthen the resolve of Egyptian Christians and to show solidarity with them, Christians in the rest of the world should provide their support to the Egyptian Church in any way they can. Such support includes prayer, material assistance and aid as well as advocacy on behalf of Egyptian Christians who are suffering from intense and persistent persecution. If the enemies of the Church have their way, there will not be an Egyptian Church to speak of in the future. Therefore, for everyone who cares about the future of Christianity in the Middle East, this is too important an issue to neglect and there should be a concerted effort to be of assistance to Egyptian Christians in any way possible.