

SPECIAL BRIEFING

27 Killed in Bombing at Chapel near St. Mark's Cathedral

Joint Briefing by the Eshhad and Egypt Security Watch Projects



EGYPT SECURITY WATCH

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INTRODUCTION

A deadly blast ripped through the women's section of the St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church on Sunday, December 11, 2016, almost instantly killing 25 people and wounding nearly 50 others. Specifically aimed at Egypt's minority Christian population, the attack was later claimed by the Islamic State, which stated its intent to target "unbelievers in Egypt, wherever they are."

While Egypt is no stranger to sectarian and extremist violence, the attack struck a devastating chord for its brutality, its symbolic weight, and its portent for future trends. The bombing was the deadliest attack of 2016 in Egypt; it disproportionately targeted women and children, who comprised 22 of the 28 fatalities (three victims succumbed to their injuries in the weeks after the bombing).

It was also one of the deadliest sectarian incidents in Egypt in recent years, alongside the New Year's 2011 bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria that killed 23 and the brutal repression of protests over a church burning in Aswan that left 28 dead in the Maspero demonstrations in October of that year. The most recent attack struck at the heart of Orthodox Christianity in Egypt, targeting a church in the complex around St. Mark's Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic Pope. This was the first large-scale sectarian attack in Egypt by the Islamic State, which had avoided explicit sectarian targets and rhetoric until the July killing of a priest and later a Sufi sheikh, both in North Sinai.

The significance of this attack merits a thorough examination of the events, causes, and responses that surround it. To provide such an examination, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy has developed this special briefing, a joint product of TIMEP's Eshhad and Egypt Security Watch projects, through a series of discussions and collaborative writing among the experts leading these initiatives. This report details the developments that occurred around the attack, provides an analysis of the causes and implications for sectarianism and extremist violence in the country, and concludes with a set of immediate and long-term recommendations to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

On December 11, 2016, an improvised explosive device detonated at St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church, near St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral. The blast left 25 dead and up to 49 injured, and was particularly deadly as it occurred during a public holiday (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), when people gathered to worship in the morning. The explosion had a disproportionate impact on women and children as it detonated on the side of the church where women normally sit; among the 25 dead, around 20 were women and children. Within two weeks of the attack, 63-year-old Isis Fares, 10-year-old Maggie Moemen, and 60-year-old Lori Naguib died after having been wounded in the blast.

Despite initial media reports that a bomb had been thrown into the church or that it was planted and detonated remotely, on the morning of December 12, President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi announced the results of an [immediate investigation](#): the attack had been committed by a suicide bomber named Mahmoud Shafiq Muhammad Mostafa. The Ministry of Interior later released a picture of his dead body.

The state has arrested a number of suspects in connection to the attack. The Ministry of Interior [announced](#) the arrest of four suspects during a raid on a safe house the day after the incident. The ministry claimed that the arrested cell, led by Mohab Mostafa al-Sayyed Kassem, is [connected](#) to the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar and the Islamic State affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula. A week after the first arrests, a worker and his wife were detained for their alleged involvement in the incident; however, it is unclear whether the two have been indicted. On January 4, the ministry [announced](#) the detention of another three suspects, who were reportedly caught with improvised explosives and other homemade weapons; two of the detained were videotaped giving confessions. It is unclear whether hearings have been arranged for those in custody.

On December 13, the Islamic State [claimed](#) responsibility for the attack, promising to escalate its “war on unbelievers.” The claim came from the Islamic State in Egypt, which has distinguished itself from Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State branch operating in Sinai since November 2014. This is the 18th attack that has been claimed by the group, with other notable attacks including car bombings against the Italian consulate in Cairo and an Egyptian Homeland Security building in Shobra al-Kheima.

The Islamic State’s claim followed statements on the attack from terror groups Liwaa al-Thawra and Hasam condemning the explicit targeting of civilians. Pinned as the usual suspect by media and initial announcements made by the [Ministry of Interior](#), the Muslim Brotherhood also condemned the attack.

Immediately following the attack, protests broke out as mourners denounced the state’s negligence in failing to prevent yet another terrorist and sectarian attack in the country that has experienced years of violence. The attack marked the 17th bombing of the year in Cairo and Giza, and the 54th sectarian incident documented by Eshhad in 2016. The protests particularly focused on the role of the interior ministry, calling for the resignation of Interior Minister [Magdy Abdel Ghaffar](#) and chanting slogans like “The police are thugs!” and “The people demand the removal of the regime!” At the protest, pro-state media figures Lamis Hadidi, Ahmed Moussa, and others also faced the crowd’s ire.

Sisi declared three days of national mourning, and a funeral took place the day after the bombing, which Sisi and other high-profile public figures attended. The funeral turned tense when hundreds of mourners were denied entry to the Virgin Mary and St. Athanasius Church where the funeral was held. Six individuals were arrested as a result. During his address at the funeral, Sisi urged the government to amend Egypt’s terrorism laws which he claimed were “restricting the judicial system.”

The day following the attack, after a moment of silence in the parliamentary session, members of Egypt’s House of Representatives proposed amending the Criminal Code of Procedure, the Military Judiciary Decree of 2014, and possibly Article 237 of the Constitution “to fight terrorism.” The proposed amendments seek to designate houses of worship as public institutions in order for the attackers of churches to be tried in military court; the Military Judiciary Decree of 2014 expands military courts’ jurisdiction over attacks against all public institutions. The proposed amendment to the Criminal Code of Procedure would require that all terrorism-related crimes be referred to military courts.

The Egyptian government has [arranged](#) to pay victims’ families compensation of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (a little more than \$5,000) per fatality and lesser amounts for the wounded. The government is also paying for victims’ medical treatment, [including](#) transporting the critically injured abroad.

ANALYSIS & CONTEXT

Sectarianism

This bombing is one of the bloodiest sectarian events since the Maspero massacre of October 2011, when 28 individuals were killed by Egyptian security forces during a demonstration over a church that was attacked in Aswan. Prior to that incident, the Church of Saint Mark and Saint Peter in Alexandria was bombed just after midnight on January 1, 2011 in another significantly bloody attack, leaving 23 dead.

“Sectarian tensions in Egypt are ongoing and this attack, although shocking in its scope, is not an aberration,” [said](#) Amira Mikhail, a fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy and principal investigator of the Eshhad project. “Despite the shift in public rhetoric by President Sisi in which he has called for religious reform and has visited the cathedral on several occasions, little has been done to actually change the institutionalized sectarianism in the government and the continued violence perpetrated by non-state actors.”

-- *Washington Post*, “Blast at Egyptian Coptic cathedral kills at least 25,” December 11, 2016

After the ousting of Muhammad Morsi from the presidency in 2013, a wave of sectarian attacks paralleled the dispersal of the sit-ins at Raba’a al-Adawiya and Nahda Squares. Since then, Eshhad has documented over 470 attacks against Egypt’s religious minorities, with a significant percentage of them occurring against church buildings and their worshipers. This year, there have been over 55 sectarian incidents, with over 80 percent perpetrated by non-state actors. Of the seven churches that were targeted this year, three were burned and one faced an unsuccessful bombing attempt.

Perpetrators of these sectarian incidents normally escape criminal or civil liability, a reality that has contributed to long-standing impunity at the local level and a breakdown of the rule of law in some areas of the country, most notably Minya, a province south of Cairo. After the January 2011 bombing in Alexandria, repeated efforts to revive an investigation have failed, and no one has been held accountable. After Maspero, criminal prosecution and investigation of the massacre fell short of necessary closure following the event. In October of this year, Eshhad published a [special briefing](#) with a closer look at the aftermath of the Maspero Massacre, concluding that the investigation and criminal prosecutions of two junior military officers were not sufficient nor transparent enough to allow for a closing of the memory of that tragedy.

“The fact that two members of the Armed Forces were sentenced to only two and three years for killing 14 civilians on a manslaughter theory (despite adequate evidence for murder), while two civilians were sentenced to essentially the same jail term for stealing a machine gun, personifies how deeply flawed justice mechanisms in the country are. When state and government actors are free to act with impunity, the system cannot be trusted to deliver justice. Criminal justice, at its core, aims to maintain order within a country by preventing the settling of scores outside the courts; yet, in this case, those who are meant to enforce the law have instead publicly defied it.”

-- Eshhad, “Post-Maspero Justice: Five Years Later,” October 2016

Sectarianism in Egypt is not, however, limited to physical violence and attacks; it is embedded deep in Egypt’s legal and social frameworks. This is visible through, among other things, the continued use of extrajudicial [reconciliation councils](#) at the expense of court-based justice, the requirement that each citizen must list one of three recognized religions on the national identification card, and the passing and upholding of problematic laws on blasphemy and church construction.

Coupled with ongoing impunity for violence against Christians, the legal infrastructure currently in place in Egypt has created an environment ripe for violent attacks like this last one. Given the Coptic Orthodox Church’s official support of Sisi since August 2013, Christians are particularly vulnerable to retribution from extremist groups seeking to settle a score with the Egyptian government.

Extremist Violence and Radicalization

Terrorist attacks have also been a regular occurrence throughout Egypt in recent years, with about 72 attack claims per month this year through September. While the majority of violence has been located in the North Sinai province, mainland Egypt has also seen attacks as well, with 119 attacks this year. Prior to the attack on the church, two other bombings targeting security forces were carried out that weekend in the Haram neighborhood of Giza and in Kafr al-Sheikh.

Generally, Egypt’s terror groups operating in the country have not employed an overtly sectarian rhetoric, framing their violence as a struggle against the state. In only 52 terror attacks¹ since 2010 were purely sectarian targets identified; 42 of these took place after 2013. Indeed, two terror groups operating in the country actually denounced the sectarian element in the church attack. Hasam Brigade, the group responsible for failed assassination attempts on former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa and Assistant Prosecutor General Zakaria Abdel Azziz, condemned the attack and suggested the state’s complicity. In its statement condemning the attack, Liwaa al-Thawra—who in October assassinated Brigadier General Adel Regaie—declared its commitment to avoiding civilian loss of life, “regardless of religion.”

Even the Islamic State in Egypt, who claimed this attack, and its Sinai counterpart have avoided overtly sectarian themes until recently when two religious figures were killed. In June 2016, Father Raphael Moussa of the St George Church was killed by Wilayat Sinai on his way back from giving a sermon in Arish, Sinai. Several months later, in October, Wilayat Sinai beheaded a Sufi sheikh, Suleiman Abu Heraz, accusing him of witchcraft. The church bombing, on the other hand, is the first time that Egypt’s Islamic State claimed such a large-scale and indiscriminate sectarian attack.

Thus, while there have been other purely sectarian attacks in Egypt before, this new connection to the Islamic State’s transnational project and genocidal objectives adds a new layer of concern. This week’s bombing can be seen as both undermining the Egyptian government’s legitimacy and strengthening the Islamic State in Egypt’s connection to the global Islamic State. By targeting Christians deemed unworthy of life, the Egyptian group proves useful to the Islamic State’s global sectarian project at a time where the organization is facing a serious legitimacy crisis, and by successfully carrying on attack on civilians, it demonstrates the Egyptian state’s weakness in protecting its citizens.

¹ TIMEP’s Egypt Security Watch project defines a “terror attack” as one that is a fully executed and premeditated act of violence carried out for political purposes. In this case, some of the attacks on churches in the summer of 2013 were not counted as acts of violence unless they were reasonably determined to have been premeditated and not spontaneous acts of violence.

At the same time, it is important to note that the most high-profile of the Islamic State's previous efforts in Egypt—the July 1 assault on Sheikh Zuweid, which represented an attempt to take and control a major urban center; and the downing of the MetroJet airliner, which was mass targeting of civilians not associated with the state—did not in fact represent a total shift in strategy, and these events remain the only ones of their kind. Regardless of whether or not the attack results in a larger strategic shift and escalated sectarian targeting, the linkage to this global sectarian discourse undoubtedly complicates any policy response, as such a response must navigate not only the Egyptian social and legal sectarian context, but also a global ideological project that the Islamic State describes in sacred and existential terms.

Government Response

As this bombing has once again brought international attention to Egypt's security failings, it is already leading to greater securitization as the state introduces more restrictive security policies in response to the public's fear of terrorism. Already, in the name of the war on terror that has been carried out since then-General Sisi called for a popular mandate to combat terrorism in July 2013, the Egyptian state has consolidated its security authority through wide-ranging legislation and repressive practices. The jailing of thousands under the controversial protest law, the continued crackdown on civil society for violation of laws on foreign funding and registering nongovernmental organizations, and the restrictions on press and expression present in existing anti-terror laws are all justified as part of an ongoing battle for security.

"Egypt is currently implementing repressive social and legal strategies to criminalize protest, organizing, and expression [and] that will be counterproductive to long-term stability," [explained](#) Allison McManus, TIMEP's Research Director.

-- ABC News, "Egypt Likely to See More ISIS Attacks, Needs to Change How it Fights Terror, Analysts Say," December 15, 2016

A major security breach, with similar proportions to this attack, provides the necessary grounds to amend Egypt's already overbroad and sweeping terrorism laws, which Sisi initiated the day after the attack. Given the heightened emotions around multiple facets of the attack—the religious dimension and the fact that the victims were primarily women and children—as well as the other bombings that week in Cairo, wide support for amending the terrorist laws is expected.

Yet as the Egyptian military and government increases its power and ability to prosecute civilians while simultaneously attempting to bring houses of worship under military jurisdiction, it is unclear that these further securitized policies will deliver the desired results. The exact effect and impact of these policies are unknown, but one possible result is that Egyptian police and military would have easier access to mosques and churches, leading to overly-policed religious practice. Despite the state's stated commitment to religious freedom and other rights, its continued repression, its curtailing of civil society, its closure of public space, and its failure to address institutional sectarianism have created an environment where peaceful channels of political expression are impeded and the social roots of complex issues, like sectarian violence, are difficult to address. Until these systems of institutional sectarianism, impunity for sectarian acts, and a social environment permissive of violence are addressed, Christians and other religious minorities will be continue to be at risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short term

- ◆ **Bring criminals to justice** by conducting a thorough and transparent investigation into the bombing and public trial of any suspects, releasing all conclusions and methodologies to the public to prevent extrajudicial measures (disappearances, torture, killings) that come with obscure investigations.
- ◆ The Egyptian government must **halt efforts to amend the Criminal Code of Procedure, the Military Judiciary Decree of 2014, and Article 237** to prevent the violation of due process rights that come with prosecuting suspects in terror attacks on churches and mosques within military courts.
- ◆ **Security protocol at houses of worship must be substantively reformed**, including retraining of staff on how to address sectarian incidents, monitoring and evaluation efforts, and salary adjustments.

Long term

- ◆ **Address root causes of sectarianism.** Egypt's sectarian culture and the government's failure to secure religious freedom for minorities, particularly Copts, are both issues underpinning continued attacks against religious minorities. The president's attendance of mass, his stated support for religious reform and for Pope Tawadros, and government efforts to rebuild destroyed churches are welcome developments; however, significant steps—such as amending the Church Construction Law, repealing blasphemy laws, and strengthening the rule of law rather than relying on reconciliation councils for justice—are necessary to guaranteeing religious freedom for Egypt's religious minorities.
- ◆ **Address root causes of radicalization.** The attack on the Coptic Church is also an example of extremist violence, which the government has responded to with policies that consolidate its security authority at the expense of human rights and civil society. The closure of institutional spaces along with government practices that marginalize and neglect vulnerable populations, close off channels of peaceful political engagement and thus fuel radicalization that yields such attacks. The Egyptian government must respond to the causes of radicalization as a means of thwarting incidents of extremist violence. This means adopting an NGO law that allows civil society to perform its function, halting the NGO trial, passing media legislation that ensures freedom of expression and speech, decriminalizing assembly by further reform of the protest law, and supporting representative local governance that provides a conduit between citizens and the state to better equip the government to serve the needs of marginalized communities.
- ◆ **Security sector reform:** The occurrence of terror attacks must not serve as pretext for consolidating the state's security authority to commit human rights violations in the name of security. Rather, such attacks—whether sectarian in nature or not—indicate the need for the government to introduce a widespread reform program across the entirety of the Egyptian security sector. This means an approach to terror threats that is dynamic in addressing the full range of possibilities, and requires the government to introduce rigorous training programs complete with meticulous monitoring and evaluation processes.
- ◆ **Context of impunity:** The issue of obscure investigation procedures is especially problematic within sectarian attacks where the government has systematically failed to hold perpetrators accountable (particularly highlighted by the examples of the Maspero massacre and the Alexandria church bombing of 2011). Such investigations contribute to a cycle of impunity that perpetuates the occurrence of attacks. The Egyptian government must stop resorting to reconciliation councils as a mechanism for justice, and instead strengthen the rule of law and due process rights via court-based justice.

THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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ESHHAD

Eshhad is an online platform that aggregates and collates alleged religious persecution and sectarian attacks in Egypt.

Eshhad, which previously existed as an independent entity and is now an incubated project at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), seeks to encourage transparency and to influence policy by explaining the context in which sectarianism occurs throughout the Middle East.

EGYPT SECURITY WATCH

TIMEP's Egypt Security Watch project provides the most comprehensive available resource to monitor Egypt's security situation, including an interactive map plotting all instances of violence and state operations, state actor and terror group profiles, and expert analyses.