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# The Cynical Conspiracy War on Egypt's Christians

by [Eric Trager](#)

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Articles & Testimony

## The Muslim Brotherhood isn't behind the callous mass murder of Copts, but it's certainly fanning the flames of hatred.

**W**hen news broke of Friday's [devastating attack](#) on Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt, in which at least 28 were murdered and 23 injured aboard a monastery-bound bus, prominent Egyptian Islamists offered a predictably libelous response: The Egyptian government was behind the attack, they alleged, and Christians got what they deserved. "We wonder about the beneficiary of igniting Egypt and putting it in the midst of bloody incidents leading to the unknown," read the Muslim Brotherhood's [statement](#). "How did the attackers know that there was a bus carrying children, women, and innocent souls," the statement asked rhetorically, implying that the government had coordinated with the terrorists.

The Brotherhood isn't alone in pushing this conspiracy theory. Ayat al-Oraby, a New York-based Islamist who boasts over 400,000 Facebook followers and [lobbied Congress](#) earlier this month, added a [sectarian rant](#) to the mix. "The whole issue," she wrote, "is [meant] to establish superficial oppression against Christians in Egypt, and try to export the image that they are persecuted." She added that Coptic Pope Tawadros II is complicit in this nefarious and callous plot.

Prominent Muslim Brotherhood youth Ahmed el-Moghir was perhaps the most explicit. "Whether those avenging Christians' crimes or the ruling regime is responsible for today's incident, the result is the same," [he wrote on Facebook](#). "Christians are paying the price for their alliance with the Egyptian regime, and there is no solution for them but to step back and reconcile with Muslims or their blood will continue to run like rivers and nobody will

care."

El-Moghir's statement reflects a typical Egyptian Islamist pathology, according to which Christians are primarily responsible for the July 2013 overthrow of Egypt's first elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, and for the severe repression of the Brotherhood that followed. In reality, the Coptic pope was only one of many, [mostly Muslim figures](#) -- including the sheikh of Al-Azhar University, the leader of a Salafist party, non-Islamist politician Mohamed el-Baradei, prominent youth activists, top military leaders, and others -- who stood with then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi when he announced the coup. But because the Brotherhood equates its mission with Islam, it regards Morsi's overthrow as an anti-Muslim act driven by non-Muslims and their allies. So, if jihadis were responsible for Friday's attack in Minya, then they were merely avenging, in el-Moghir's words, "Christians' crimes" -- namely, the coup and its aftermath.

But far from being in cahoots with the Egyptian government, as Muslim Brothers allege, Egyptian Christians are increasingly beholden to rulers who have failed to protect them time and again. After all, Friday's murderous rampage is merely the latest in a series of terrorist attacks -- the most severe of which have been claimed by the Islamic State -- against Egypt's Christian community: The [Islamic State killed 25](#) in a Cairo church attack in December, [drove more than 100 Christian families](#) from northern Sinai after a series of attacks in February and March, and [killed 49 Christians](#) in two church bombings on Palm Sunday in April. According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, terrorists [have attacked](#) Christian institutions or individuals over three dozen times in the past six months, killing 121 and injuring 168.

This is not random violence, but part of a malevolent political strategy. As George Washington University's Mokhtar Awad [noted](#), the Islamic State believes that its anti-Christian terrorism will destabilize Egypt, much as its predecessor organization's attacks on Shiites in Iraq fomented instability in that country.

To be sure, the Muslim Brotherhood isn't directly responsible for these attacks. But the Brotherhood's anti-Christian incitement contributes to an environment that legitimizes them. Indeed, Brotherhood leaders routinely portray Christians not as victims of violence, but as beneficiaries of an Egyptian government that has brutally repressed the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

The sectarian propaganda isn't subtle. In an April Facebook [post](#), for example, Muslim Brotherhood leader Gamal Heshmat falsely claimed that Egyptian President Sisi had cancelled Islamic education in mosques, adding parenthetically "even as Christian religious education in Sunday schools continues." In [another post](#) earlier that month, Heshmat claimed that "Jewish and Christian religious extremists" who "rule the world" were responsible for destabilizing Islamist-led governments. Along the same lines, following the Palm Sunday attacks, Brotherhood leader Abdul Mawgoud el-Dardery [blamed](#) Christians for the "crisis" and indicated that the violence would only end when Christians aligned with "Muslims," by which he seemingly meant Islamists.

At other times, the Muslim Brotherhood portrays Christians as aggressors. Its political party [tweeted a photo](#) of Christian clerics walking past a tank during Pope Francis's April visit to Cairo, and declared the Egyptian military the "church militia." Following the Palm Sunday attacks, Muslim Brotherhood youth figure Amr Farrag [promoted the conspiracy theory](#) that the Coptic pope had advance knowledge of the attack and left the church before it happened.

More common, Brotherhood leaders simply depict Christians as enemies. "A Jew [meaning Sisi] rules Egypt for Israel's sake and tries to divide it, while Egyptian Christians insult Islam and Muslims," Muslim Brotherhood leader Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar [wrote](#) in April.

These comments amount to blatant incitement to violence -- especially considering the tenuous empathy for Egyptian Christians' fraught position within some quarters of the country. In a [television interview](#) following the Palm Sunday attacks, the nephew of a female Muslim security guard slain in the bombing shared his aunt's

discomfort in guarding the church: She wondered whether God would accept her prayers if she prayed in a church, and whether she would be considered a martyr if she died there. Of course, she ultimately did her duty, and her nephew shared her story as evidence of Egypt's unity. "Those who died were Christians who were praying and Muslims who were praying," he said. "I would like to strongly assert to ISIS that...we were not finished off."

The Brotherhood's sectarian incitement, however, is intended to make Egyptian Muslims think twice about guarding churches -- much as the Islamic State's brutality makes them think twice for security reasons. And while President Sisi has denounced the terrorists' attempt to "hit at our cohesion," his government's ineffectiveness in protecting Christians has left them to the mercy of this horrific one-two punch.

*Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days](#).* ❖

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