

Sisi and the Copts: Grim Prospects for a Troubled Relationship

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On December 11, a massive explosion shattered St. Mark's Cathedral in Abbasia, central Cairo, claiming the lives of more than 25 worshipers and wounding scores of others. The event cast even more anxiety and strain over the situation of Egypt's Copts, which has been volatile and troubled for some time.

Immediately after the blast, anger spread among Copts, especially youths, who gathered at the site of the incident chanting slogans against both Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi and his interior minister, holding them ultimately responsible for the massacre. Anger quickly escalated against media personalities close to the Egyptian regime, including Lamid el-Hadidy and Ahmed Moussa, who were assaulted and expelled by the protesting crowd, ostensibly rejecting their efforts to justify the regime's failure to prevent the attack.

Fearing that these demonstrations might grow, the government declared an official state of mourning in the country for three days. President Sisi himself attended the funeral for the victims. But rather than holding the funeral service at the main St. Mark's Cathedral in central Cairo, as would have been expected, the ceremony was conducted in a church in the Nasr City suburb. Attendance was restricted to families of the victims. Other mourners from the Coptic community seeking to enter were detained, stirring the ire of many toward the harsh measures, which were in fact carried out in coordination between the state and the Coptic Church. The general feeling in the community could be summed up with one question: does the Coptic community not have a right to bid farewell to their martyrs? Prior to the funeral service, Sisi himself had named the culprit in the blast while simultaneously rejecting accusations against the security agencies for dereliction and deficiency.

The event was a clear indication that the Sisi administration, of which Copts had generally been major supporters, had instantly pivoted to fearing their protests, an expression of mounting disappointment and distrust. Sisi seemed to realize that the Coptic Church leadership, notably Pope Tawadros II, would not be able to curb the anger of the Coptic youth, and has thus resorted to security measures. Indeed, the Church leadership has not been immune to scholarship from many in the Coptic community, who accuse it of collusion with the authorities at the expense of the Copts themselves. Pope Tawadros II – who among detractors is dubbed “the regime's Pope” – had already become subject to criticism for his involvement in controversial measures deemed detrimental to the status of Copts on political affairs. The security approach adopted by Sisi towards the Copts carried an additional message: that he will not hesitate to use force against anyone, even close allies, if his assessment is that they constitute an opposition or a

threat, whether actual or potential.

The Coptic community was accorded little reprieve. A few days after the incident at St Mark's Cathedral, Egypt witnessed anti-Copt incidents in several governorates. In Alexandria, a follower of a hardline Salafi group slaughtered a Coptic merchant in front of his shop; in the Monufia governorate, a Coptic couple was found murdered in their home; and in the Assiut governorate in southern Egypt, a Coptic medical doctor was found murdered in his apartment. Egyptian Copts felt targeted nationwide.

On February 19, the Sinai branch of the Islamic State terror organization released a video vowing to target Copts everywhere, considering them local proxies of the "Crusader" countries, including the United States, and accusing them of complicity with the Egyptian regime. The video declares that "it is incumbent upon the mujahideen and the monotheists to strike Egypt's Christians, disturb their lives, and bring them into the circle of conflict, for they are among the warriors of the Crusaders." It also claims responsibility for the bombing of St. Peter and St. Paul's Church last December.

Indeed, soon after the release of the video segment, followers of the Islamic State in Sinai killed, beheaded, and burned a number of Copts — amidst a seemingly total absence of the state, despite ample awareness that the Copts had become a primary target for terror. Facing horrendous attacks and feeling abandoned by security forces, many Copts in the Sinai Peninsula felt compelled to relocate to the city of Ismailia, west of the Suez Canal, leaving behind their homes and property. One early count was 133 families, with a total of 546 members.

The state media seemed more focused on contesting the characterization of these grave events as being population "displacement" and "flight" — terms with connotations of ethnic cleansing— rather than focusing on seeking solutions for a serious issue affecting Egyptian citizens irrespective of their religious affiliation. Pope Tawadros II, in a position perceived by many Copts as supportive of the government at the expense of the community, issued a statement on March 1 rejecting in turn the use the term "displacement". The Pope's statement provoked a wave of resentment and indignation, not only among Copts, but also among human rights and civil society activists who viewed it as a distortion of facts, crafted merely to absolve the authorities from their responsibilities before the international community and international law.

While the dominant Coptic reaction was one of anger and frustration, some voices within the community sought to exonerate the Sisi government from the successive calamities that have befallen Egyptian Copts, by resorting to the standard argument used by the government. The Coptic community was thus warned that the only alternative to the Sisi administration, were it to fall, would be the Islamists.

After nearly three years of Sisi's reign, the Copts find themselves facing continuous decay in their livelihood and rights with no end in sight. Violence against them has reached unprecedented levels, raising the genuine fear of suffering the same fate of minorities in Syria and Iraq, effectively obliterated. Copts have witnessed the destruction of their churches, the killing, beheading, and burning of their people and the looting of their possessions; and now they have to endure forced displacement and mass exodus.

The sentiment among Copts is that Sisi will provide no real security for their community. Copts will instead be left to attrition, loss, and neglect, facing on their own the depravity of terrorism — while Sisi, against ground realities, polishes his credentials and legitimacy to a world audience as a fighter of terrorism. While suffering continuous losses, the Copts expect little from Sisi apart from an annual attendance at the Christmas mass, more unfulfilled promises, and more supportive but hollow rhetoric — all designed to improve his own image before the West, with precious little regard for the actual interests of the Copts or other Egyptians.

These momentous events in Egypt add to the complexity of the nation's delicate situation and cast shadows of anxiety, not only over the Copts, but also over Egypt as a whole. The question is thus not just about the future of the

Copts but about the future of all of Egypt under Sisi's precarious rule.



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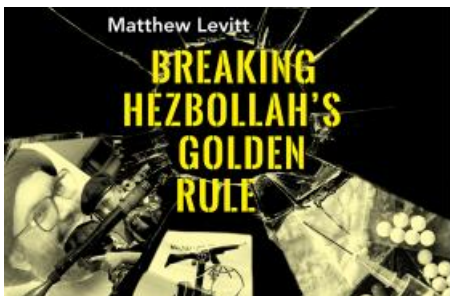
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