

From Cairo to Berlin: Why is ISIS Targeting Christians?

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On December 11, an Islamic State bomb targeting St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo's Abbassia district killed 25 Egyptian Christians. According to the official investigation, the suicide bomber was an Egyptian citizen named Abu Abdullah al-Masri, or Mahmud Shafiq. Following that attack, a stolen truck drove through a Christmas market in Berlin, Germany, leaving 12 dead. ISIS has also sent threatening message to Christians in North Sinai and killed eight of them, leading to the deportation of 250 Christian families to the Canal Zone.

While the Islamic State's targeting of Christians is not new, the intensity of their attacks has increased following their recent defeats in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Sinai. These defeats, particularly in its strongholds, caused ISIS to lose many of the field advances it achieved earlier in 2016.

ISIS has been under continuous attack in Mosul from the international coalition, led by the United States, France, Iraq, and PMU forces. As a result, the group lost a number of its leaders. As these military operations continue, the Iraqi government is seeking greater support from its coalition allies to wrap up the battle there.

The situation for ISIS in Syria is not any better. In addition to being targeted by international and regional forces, Turkey implemented Operation Euphrates Shield, which uses the Turkish army and Turkish-backed Free Army militias to target ISIS in Syria. These groups are prepared to continue their campaign on al-Bab, the Islamic State's last urban stronghold on the Syrian-Turkish border.

ISIS also keeps losing Syrian towns at the hands of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Arab Sunni forces. By mid-2015, ISIS had lost many of its towns along the Syrian-Turkish border, which served as a main pipeline for supplies and recruits. A year later in Libya, they lost the coastal city of Sirte to the Government of National Accord forces; ISIS was hoping to establish itself there to make up for the sieges in Mosul and Raqqa.

All these losses corresponded with several attacks by the Egyptian army on the ISIS-Egypt branch in the Sinai, leading to the death of several ISIS leaders. It is worth noting that the ISIS attacks in Egypt cannot be solely attributed to the defeat of the group in Syria and Iraq, but they came at least partially as a response to the large -scale campaigns launched by the regime against Islamist groups following the ousting of the Brotherhood regime in 2013. Furthermore, the Coptic Church's support for Sisi made them a target for radical organizations.

But these successive defeats on the battlefield were the catalyst ISIS used to launch attacks on Christian sites such as

the Petrine Church in Cairo and the Christmas market outside Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. They fostered an obsession among with revenge against the coalition countries and with attracting recruits by creating a confrontation between Islam and Christianity, because ISIS depends on the narrative of the oppression of Islam and vulnerable Muslims by the aggressive European West.

Despite the fact that Germany is the largest European country that does not engage in military operations outside its borders and, unlike France and Great Britain does not have a history of colonization in the Islamic world, ISIS is provoked by the fact that such a major European country would provide asylum for the Muslims of Syria and Iraq who are fleeing the civil wars. The terrorist attack in Berlin was timed after ISIS called for targeting the “Crusader” coalition countries.

At the same time, an anti-Islam, far right rhetoric is spreading in the West, led by the Alternative for Germany party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and new U.S. President Donald Trump. This widespread rhetoric lends support to ISIS propaganda claiming that the West has an absolute hatred of Islam and absolutely rejects coexistence with Muslims. Certainly, Donald Trump’s campaign statement that radical Islam threatens the American way of life was a major talking point that enabled ISIS to attract the Orlando nightclub-shooter, Omar Mateen, and the Nice truck driver, Muhammad Lahouaiej Bouhlel.

It is in the West’s interest today not to declare any war on Islam, so as not to give ISIS any excuse to use an “Islam versus Christianity” mantra or anything else that would enable it to attract more recruits and supporters. As the Islamic State continues to lose strength in Iraq and Syria, it will continue to increase the number and intensity of its attacks against Christians in Egypt and Europe. Such attacks against Christians are not expected to slow down in the short term.



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