

# Action by Egypt's Military Rulers against Copts Endangers Transition

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Brief Analysis

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## The use of violence by Egypt's military rulers against Coptic protestors undermines the rulers' international legitimacy and damages their domestic viability.

**O**n October 9, in the worst instance of violence since the February overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, 25 Egyptians were killed and more than 320 injured in street fighting between Coptic demonstrators and Egyptian soldiers. Some casualties were caused by shooting, others when demonstrators were run over by armored personnel carriers.

These events offered a chilling reminder of the upsurge in attacks targeting Egypt's Coptic Christian community -- which constitutes roughly 10 percent of population -- both before and in the months following Mubarak's ouster. On January 1, for example, twenty-three people were killed and ninety-seven injured in an attack on a church in Alexandria. Subsequent incidents have included the burning of a church in Helwan in early March; the burning of three Coptic churches in Imbaba on May 7, during which fifteen people were killed and more than two hundred injured; and an attack by hundreds of Salafists on a church in al-Minya on June 24, which included the attempted murder of the local Coptic patriarch.

These incidents, coupled with the expected success of Islamists in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, have unnerved Egypt's Copts. In turn, since the beginning of March, Coptic activists have protested periodically outside downtown Cairo's state media building, known as Maspero, demanding that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the interim military ruling body, rebuild Coptic churches, bring the attackers to justice, and provide better security for Coptic communities. On October 5, in response to a September 30 arson attack on St. George's Church in Aswan, Coptic activists staged another sit-in in front of Maspero but were forcibly removed by military police and Central Security Forces. As videos of violence against the demonstrators spread on the Internet, outraged Coptic activists countered by planning an October 9 march from northern Cairo to Maspero.

The October 9 march reportedly drew some 10,000 demonstrators and featured anti-SCAF chants. On reaching downtown, marchers were pelted with rocks hurled by SCAF-associated thugs, and -- on approaching Maspero -- attacked with clubs. For the uniformed authorities' part, they at first responded to the procession by firing into the air, but soon afterward this restraint was punctured by two armored personnel carriers barreling into the marchers, with soldiers atop each vehicle firing into the crowds, a maneuver that accounted for most of the day's casualties. As word of the attack spread across social networks, youth activists rushed to the scene to protect the Coptic demonstrators.

## Manipulating the Media

Following this bloody crackdown, Egyptian authorities moved swiftly to tilt media coverage in their favor. Osama Haikal, the minister of information, advised the state-run media to cover the clashes "wisely"; Egyptian television responded by reporting that Coptic protestors were attacking the military with stones, Molotov cocktails, and live ammunition. When several employees of state-run television used Twitter to denounce their networks' coverage of the clashes, Haikal announced that a trial would be set for anyone who "spreads rumors." The state-run press also reported that three soldiers had been killed when, in fact, no military deaths whatsoever had occurred.

Meanwhile, the SCAF moved to close down independent media outlets. Soldiers stormed the studios of the U.S.-funded Alhurra satellite station and the privately owned Channel 25, severing the two stations' live coverage of the clashes. According to reports, plainclothes figures also tried to break in to the studio of the pan-Arab satellite channel Al-Arabiya, prompting a cut in its coverage.

Most alarmingly, the Egyptian government used the state-run media to instigate further violence against the Coptic demonstrators, calling on Egyptian citizens to fill the streets to protect the soldiers. Islamist demonstrators responded by chanting, "Islamiya! Islamiya!" Other pro-military demonstrators stood alongside security forces, reportedly calling, "The people want the fall of the Christians." Adding to the tumult, thugs attacked Christian-owned businesses throughout downtown Cairo, as well as the Coptic hospital where many of the victims were being treated, before the military began enforcing a 2 a.m. curfew.

Even before the October 9 events, the SCAF had repeatedly used the need to restore order as a pretext for expanding its autocratic rule. On August 1, the military arrested 115 activists when clearing a monthlong Tahrir Square sit-in; on September 9, following the attack on Israel's embassy in Cairo, it expanded the nation's controversial emergency law; and the military has continually used the rise in street crime since the January revolt as an excuse to try civilians before military tribunals. But the latest anti-Coptic violence represents the first instance of unmistakable involvement by the SCAF.

## SCAF's Critics and Cronies

Although al-Ghad Party leader Ayman Nour, Egypt Freedom Party leader Amr Hamzawy, Social Democratic Party figure Mohamed Abul Ghar, and a representative of Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change have compared the SCAF, unfavorably, to the Mubarak regime, many key political players have sided with the military. Leading presidential candidate Amr Moussa, for instance, reportedly stressed the importance of "ruling with an iron fist in order to protect the country from looming chaos."

Moussa's pro-SCAF stance has been echoed resoundingly by Islamist leaders. Former Muslim Brotherhood leader and current presidential candidate Abdel Monem Abouel-Fetouh cited the clashes as advancing "foreign and Zionist aims." Another Islamist presidential candidate, Selim al-Awa, blamed foreigners for the attacks, claiming the United States was seeking a pretext to intervene militarily in Egypt to protect Christian houses of worship.

Such reactions by Islamists suggest they remain firmly aligned with the SCAF, even despite recent disagreements

regarding the timing of elections and the drafting of supraconstitutional principles. While distrust between Islamists and the military undoubtedly remains, the Islamists continue to view the SCAF -- and the limited stability that it provides -- as their best means for achieving maximal influence in post-Mubarak Egypt. Liberal and leftist leaders, by contrast, increasingly view the SCAF as the primary cause of the country's political uncertainty and continuing instability.

## U.S. Policy Options toward a More Assertive SCAF

Recent actions by the SCAF suggest an intent to play a dominant role in Egypt's political future. Such a goal is likely motivated, at least in part, by the fear that a political transition toward a more democratic system would jeopardize the group's many privileges. As a result, the SCAF is increasingly willing to use any means it deems necessary for quelling dissent, including inciting sectarian violence for political gain.

Today, while the SCAF is the only player capable of maintaining a modicum of stability in Egypt, the current trajectory does not suggest the kind of stability with which Washington will be comfortable for very long. Equally troubling is the SCAF's apparently durable alliance with Egypt's Islamist parties.

In Egypt, the Coptic Church is calling for a three-day fast to express its displeasure, a tack many Copts are denouncing as insufficient. Meanwhile, Egypt's youthful activists have suggested that they will use the funerals of those killed during the October 9 fighting to launch new demonstrations calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf's interim government. The sentiment suggests that the violence -- against Copts and other protestors -- is likely to escalate.

The Obama administration has already issued a public statement conveying its "deep concern" about the violence. Given, however, that the violence risks sparking yet another round of demonstrations targeting the SCAF's authority, the administration statement -- which called for "restraint," but did not even mention that the excessive violence was perpetrated by the military -- could have and should have been much tougher.

The influence of American policymakers on their current "best" ally -- the SCAF -- appears to be diminishing. The violence perpetrated by the military is a disservice to the Egyptian people and undermines the chances for democratic transition in Egypt. Now is the time, both publicly and privately, to articulate to Egypt's military leadership what is at stake. The US-Egyptian partnership can endure a revolution, and populist politics, and anti-American rhetoric. But it will not likely endure government-sponsored pogroms against Egypt's Coptic Christians.

*Eric Trager, The Washington Institute's Ira Weiner fellow, is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. ❖*

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