



Ancient Christian Communities Endure Terrorism in Egypt

While the world has been focused on the Russian takeover of Crimea, radical Muslims continue to wage war on the Christians in Egypt. This brutal war, which has targeted civilians, priests and nuns and destroyed monasteries dating to the sixth century, goes unnoticed by the mainstream press in the West. Tourists trying to visit Egypt's Saint Catherine's Monastery, one of the most important sites of ancient Christianity in the Middle East, have been attacked by militant Muslims. These killings, bombings, rapes and slaughter of Christians have not made many headlines in America because they belie the illusion that interfaith dialogue with radical Islam can achieve understanding and peace.

The rise of fundamentalist Islamic terrorists over the last three decades led to targeting Coptic Christians and other Christians, including tourists, in Egypt. When Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in 2011 following the Arab Spring and the fall of Mubarak's government, Coptic Christians feared a holocaust.

Many in the West continue to believe that better communication with the sworn enemies of Christianity and Judaism will end religious conflict in the Middle East. Leaders in the United States and Europe foster the hope that democracy will resolve religious violence in the region. This view has been rejected by Coptic Christians in Egypt. If Western democracies won't protect them, they have little alternative to supporting a military government headed by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. "Democratic" elections that brought Morsi to power failed them.

The Fraud of the 'Arab Spring'

The Arab Spring, enthusiastically welcomed by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, unleashed horrible violence against Christians. Western-educated Mohamed Morsi became the first democratically elected head of state in Egyptian history when he won a run-off election with 51.7 percent of the vote. Although marred by irregularities and allegations of rigging, the election was acclaimed by policymakers in the West as a sign that democracy had

come to Egypt. Once in power, Morsi granted himself unlimited powers to protect the nation from its alleged anti-democratic elements who he claimed were backing the old Mubarak regime. Morsi claimed the power to legislate without judicial review. His government began purging regional governors, judges, police and government bureaucrats and replacing them with the Muslim Brotherhood. In November 2012, he issued an Islamist draft constitution and called for a referendum to enact it. His opponents understood that any referendum would be controlled and manipulated by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Everyone seemed to know this except Barack Obama and the U.S. State Department. They were caught off guard when hundreds of thousands of anti-Morsi protesters took to the streets in 2013. A military coup in July 2013 ousted Morsi. Joining the coup were General al-Sisi, Muslim opposition leader Mohamed El Baredai and Coptic Pope Tawadros II. The military suspended the constitution and initiated a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Arab Spring followed a pattern of takeover evident with Fidel Castro in 1959 in Cuba and more recently with Hugo Chavez-Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Proclaiming popular support, these dictators systematically and quietly purge the government and the military to put their own followers into power. Government rewards are directed to supporters. The revolution is announced in the name of the people. This is exactly what happened in Egypt, except with a Muslim twist. Morsi was not a Communist but a radical Islamist. While radical Islamic and Communist ideologies are fundamentally opposed, they share much in common, including a hatred of the West, Judaism and Christianity. Both ideologies believe in their missions to transform the world.

Knowing his American audience well, Morsi initially projected a voice of moderation. He had been an assistant professor from 1982-1985 at California State University, Northridge. Earlier he had worked for NASA developing engines for the space shuttle. He knew what American

leaders wanted to hear. Although a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, a terrorist organization, he told the world that the Muslim Brotherhood was different in Egypt. It was more of a social welfare agency, involved in poor neighborhoods providing food, clothing and education for those left behind. In this way, Morsi portrayed himself as a kind of community organizer. It had worked for Barack Obama, so why not for Morsi? Give the Muslim Brotherhood a chance to rule, it was said in Washington, and they will mature once in power, rejecting their radical Islamic beliefs calling for the destruction of Israel, war on the West, and the annihilation of Christianity.

Coptic Christians under Islamic Rule

Morsi's new "moderate" face of Islam made for a nice copy in the American press and reinforced the image of Barack Obama as a transformational world leader. Obama had promised change and a new world in which America would no longer be despised. This explains much about why the mainstream press did not report about the violence against Christians in Egypt, involving brutal murders, looting of Christian stores, and the burning of Christian homes, schools and churches.

Coptic Christians constitute about 10 percent of the 90 million people in Egypt today. The Copts are one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East. According to tradition, the Apostle St. Mark introduced Christianity to Egypt during the reign of Roman emperor Claudius in 42 A.D. By the year 200 A.D. Christianity had spread throughout Egypt. A fragment of the Gospel of John, written in the ancient language of Coptic, and New Testament writings found in Oxryncus attest to early Christianity's penetration into Egypt. By the third century, Christians made up the majority of Egypt's population, and the Church of Alexandria was recognized as one of Christendom's four Apostolic Sees, second in honor only to the Church of Rome. The Church of Alexandria is the oldest Christian church on the continent of Africa.

Alexandria became a center of Christian learning. Christian scholars such as Athenagora, Clement, Didymus and Origen undertook Biblical studies in Alexandria. Studies were not limited to theology and comparative Bible studies, but included science, mathematics and the humanities. Egyptian Christianity contributed to the creation of monasticism. By the fifth century, hundreds of monasteries had been established throughout Egypt. St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, came to Egypt while traveling to Jerusalem in 400 A.D. and detailed his experiences in his letters.

In 451 A.D., following the Council of Chalcedon, the Church of Alexandria split into two branches. Those who accepted

the Council became Melkite and those who rejected it became the Miaphysite branch. In the seventh century, Muslim Arabs invaded Egypt, leaving Coptic (Miaphysite) Christians cut off from the mainstream of Christianity. Only in the 19th century did the Copts' position under Muslim rule improve as they were awarded political rights and representation in government. Copts participated in the Egyptian national movement for independence. Under Gamal Nasser, many Copts fled Egypt, establishing churches in Australia, North America or Europe. Those who remained in Egypt found greater freedom under Anwar Sadat, who governed 1970-1981. Sadat's moderate policies toward the Copts fostered the hostility of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hosni Mubarak's rule, 1981-2011, provided protection to Copts, but following his fall in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood launched full-scale assaults on the Copts.

Today the non-Chalcedonian Coptic Orthodox Church constitutes the majority of the Egyptian Christian population. In November 2012, Bishop Tawadros was chosen as the new pope of Egypt's Coptic Christians.

Under Morsi, An Undeclared War

The rise of Islamic terrorism in recent years has led to an increase in attacks on Christians. On January 1, 2011, before the Arab Spring, a car bomb set off at a Coptic Orthodox Church killed 21 people and injured 79 more. Clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslim fundamentalists continued and under Morsi increased. Dozens of Copts died in sectarian clashes in 2012. In late September a Coptic Christian was sentenced to jail for six years because he posted cartoons on Facebook that were allegedly defamatory to Islam and Mohammed and insulted Egyptian President Morsi. As the schoolmaster was being led out of court, mobs attacked the police car used to take him away from the court.

Even more harrowing were widespread reports of Coptic women and young girls being abducted and forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men. Under Morsi's reign, Coptic women were subjected to increasing incidents of sexual assaults, rapes and harassment. These attacks were encouraged by fundamentalist Islamic religious leaders as a strategy of humiliation of the Copts. One radical Muslim preacher, Huwaini, declared that these jihadist attacks on Coptic women would ensure the further increase of Muslims on earth. *FrontPage* magazine reported him saying, "If anyone prevents our dawah [preaching] or stands in our way, then we must kill them or take them as hostage and confiscate their wealth, women, and children."

Little wonder that Copts supported the military coup against Morsi.

Morsi's Aftermath and the Monastery

The ouster of Morsi in July 2013 unleashed new waves of attacks by fundamentalist Muslims against Christians. Reports emerged of violence against Christians across Egypt. Within days after Morsi's fall, Islamic mobs were on a rampage. On July 5, only two days after the military overthrow of Morsi, fundamentalist radicals ran amok through the Christian village of Nagaa Hassan, burning dozens of homes, ransacking stores and stabbing people. One Christian activist, Emile Naseem, was hacked and beaten to death. In other villages, Islamic fundamentalist mobs paraded through town shouting "Death to the Christians!" Christian stores in many of these villages were marked by black X's to identify stores for mobs to attack. *USA Today* in August 2013 reported that within a one-week period "forty churches have been looted and torched, while 23 others have been attacked and heavily damaged."

In Cairo, clashes between the military and Morsi supporters left more than 800 dead. Christians were blamed by Islamists for these clashes, even though they were not involved. In towns such as Al Nazia, local mosques broadcasted through loudspeakers that Christians were attacking Muslim protesters. Hundreds stormed the local Coptic church. The Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi's Freedom and Justice announced on their Facebook page that the Coptic Church had declared "war against Islam and Muslims."

Fundamentalist Muslim anger about Morsi's ouster was especially evident in the Sinai region close to Israel's border. In August 2013, the Egyptian government closed St. Catherine's Monastery to visitors as a precaution. This was only the third closure in 50 years. The monastery reopened three weeks later with Egyptian security forces in full force to protect the handful of foreigners visiting the area in armed convoys. Two Americans had been kidnapped in the region the previous year, and the kidnappings of an Israeli and a Norwegian had not been forgotten.

St. Catherine's is a holy site that used to draw tourists from throughout the world. The monastery was built by Emperor Justinian I, who reigned 527-565 A.D. The monastery was built at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God spoke to Moses according to the Old Testament. The decline in tourism has devastated the local economy and the local Bedouin

tribesmen. Bedouins in the area tell their children how the Roman emperor Justinian brought their ancestors to the Sinai in the sixth century to build the walled monastery and protect the monks with their lives. In reporting the plight of the Bedouin tribesmen, the *Washington Post* quoted a local guide, "We teach our children that the monastery gives us life. This place puts food on our table." They honor the bearded monks, who devote their days to prayer, and their library that includes some of the oldest and most precious manuscripts in Christendom. Until recently, the monastery drew thousands of visitors a day coming in hundreds of tour buses. Now only one or two buses come.

Cairo Churches Attacked

Violence against Copts reached a height in October 2013, when a drive-by shooting by masked gunmen sprayed a wedding party outside a Cairo church with automatic weapons. Four people were killed including two young girls, 8 and 13 years old. Seventeen others were wounded, including several Muslims. The attack was condemned by Sunni Islamic leaders, as well as Islamic leaders supporting Morsi. "Places of worship are sacred," declared the spokesman for the Alliance for Supporting Legitimacy and Rejecting the Coup.

These Islamic leaders have not, however, denounced the violent past and hard-line rhetoric of clerics who often engage in anti-Christian diatribes. One wonders if the exhortations to protect places of worship are intended for Western consumption. After all, the wedding massacre was not the first attack on Christians in Cairo. In fact, in August, only a few months before the drive-by shooting, 30 churches and church-related facilities, including schools and cultural centers, had been set ablaze. The Virgin Mary Church, where the funeral for the October shooting victims was held, had been torched and looted by a mob chanting for Egypt to become an Islamic state. In Sohag, a city south of Cairo, St. George's Church on the Nile River was set on fire.

Attacks on Coptic Christians became so widespread following Morsi's fall from power that in December 2013, a few days before Christmas, Britain's Prince Charles denounced the persecution of Christians in Egypt. Visiting the Egyptian Coptic Church center in Steverage and the Syriac Orthodox cathedral in west London, Charles met church members who had suffered in these attacks. Later at a reception he declared, "For 20 years I have tried to build bridges between Islam and Christianity to dispel ignorance and misunderstanding. The point though, surely, is that we have now reached a crisis where bridges

are rapidly being destroyed by those with a vested interest in doing so.”

The Unfathomable U.S. Response

In the circumstances of the war against Christians in Egypt, it's easy to understand why Coptic Christians supported the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013. Coptic Pope Tawadros II publicly backed the country's new military rulers and has been adamant in his support of the new government.

Less understandable is the response by leaders in both the Democratic and Republican parties in their denunciation of the coup. *The Obama administration condemned the military overthrow and called for the restoration of democracy, the release of Morsi and the inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in new elections.* The administration declined, though, to call the takeover a coup, which would have automatically cut off U.S. aid to Egypt. Senators John McCain (R-Arizona), Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) and Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) were vociferous in calling for U.S. aid to be cut off. In March 2014 the Obama administration turned down a request from Egypt for Apache attack helicopters urgently needed to fight terrorism in the Sinai.

The leaders in Washington—the White House, Congress, the State Department—remain convinced that democracy in the Middle East is the only path to peace. They might be right in the long run, but in the short run the Copts don't believe it. Morsi's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government brought violence and tragedy to the Copts, threatening their very existence as followers of an ancient faith, Christianity.

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by
Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation
7800 Bonhomme Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63105
Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897

Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.
Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and subscribers are invited to have it printed in their local newspapers.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation are tax deductible as allowed by law.

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—*Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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