

SYRIA: 'Next time we will not survive' – Middle East Christian refugee

World Watch Monitor (12.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2QJj9F0> – As many as 80% of Syria's Christians have left their country since the start of the civil war in 2011, while 50% of Iraq's Christians have been uprooted since 2006, according to a report produced by Christian charities Open Doors International, Served and Middle East Concern in June last year. The arrival of IS was only the "tipping point" of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an "overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future", the report said.

Lebanon received the most refugees and in December 2016 the advocacy group ADF International heard some of their stories, which they have now shared with World Watch Monitor. In the snippets below, the interviewees are referred to by their initials alone, to preserve their safety.

"We lived in Mosul [northern Iraq] until 2005 [when] bullets were shot into our home. Between June and July, 2005, terrorists tried to kidnap our son three times, but he was able to escape," said S. H., a Christian father of five, adding that after this he moved with his family, including three disabled children, to Qaraqosh, 30km southeast of Mosul.

Three months after Islamic State arrived there, on 6 August 2014, the family fled again. "They gave us three options:

conversion, death or jizya [a special tax for non-Muslims],” said S. H., adding that this time they fled to Lebanon – because “it is Christian and Arab-speaking”.

Another man, a 43-year-old father of two girls, identified by his first initial, N., fled to Lebanon in February 2015 after IS gave him 24 hours written notice to leave Baghdad, his job and his home, or he and his family would be killed.

“My relatives – my cousin and his grandparents – were killed by bombings at their home, because they didn’t want to quit their job or convert. Colleagues of mine were kidnapped. Some were freed for US\$16,000, others were killed. They were told they must deny Jesus or they would be killed,” he said.

It is difficult to assess how many people have been killed by IS but mass graves were found last week, some of which contained thousands of bodies.

‘Christians must not be alive’

For 70 years another Christian family, identified as S. and H.K., had resided in the city of Hasakah, northeast Syria, where they lived at peace with their Muslim neighbours, S. told ADF. All that changed with the arrival of Islamic State.

“Our neighbours joined IS [and the group] used [them] to communicate with us [that we had] three options: convert, leave, or die. They burned our farm at night to kill us, but we were not there. We escaped, going from village to village.

We have two brothers, but now we don't know anything about them. We have had no contact since we fled," S. said.

A 71-year-old Catholic Christian, identified as H. S. H., recalls how he and his brother fled Aleppo, Syria on 27 December 2013, to find refuge at his farm in Raqqa, only to find further danger. "Our taxi driver was shot in the neck. My brother and I were assaulted and then locked up in the chicken stag pen, a dark room. We were locked up for three days. This was the last time I saw my brother. Our captors wanted to know if we were the owners of the farm. They stole my money. My neighbours later told me that this was IS," he said.

"We were fed dog food, and they told me that Christians must not be alive. We were told: convert to Islam, or be killed. They told me if I converted, they would give the farm back to me. The jizya was also an option. But some of my neighbours, who were Armenian, were killed after paying jizya."

He said he was able to escape when the Syrian army attacked IS, with the help of his Muslim neighbours, and that he fled to Lebanon as he had heard the UN could help him. "I have waited three years. The UN has not helped me directly. I had an interview at the French embassy; they told me it would take 20 days to get back to me. It has been two months," he said.

At the time of the interview he lived with friends in Beirut and had survived three heart attacks. "I do not want to go back to Raqqa or Aleppo," he said. "I have had too much trauma and could never go back. I don't want to remember what happened. It is too difficult."

Psychological trauma

The same is true for a Chaldean Christian family from Batnaya, northern Iraq. They had not been able to flee because of illness in the family, when IS entered the town in August 2014. Militants came to their house repeatedly, threatening to rape and kill them if they would not convert or if they called on anyone for help.

“After 22 days, IS took our whole family into El Sharkat prison in Mosul and stole everything we had,” the 63-year-old father, identified as G. H. G., said.

“[They] separated my 14-year-old son and me from my wife, daughter and our handicapped child. I thought they would kill my son and me, and I did not know what would happen to my family. After four days they took my son and me to another prison, in Kirkuk, where we were for five days until they released us. In the meantime, [my wife] had been released from prison because of our handicapped child. She took our daughter and our handicapped child to a church in Kirkuk. This is where we were reunited.”

Fearing for their lives, they fled to Beirut, but he said his daughter has psychological trauma and that they will never go back: “We escaped death by a miracle ... Next time we will not survive.”

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EGYPT: Seven Coptic Christians killed by Isil in bus attack

The Telegraph (02.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2PDQPXW> – Gunmen attacked a bus carrying Coptic Christians in central Egypt on Friday, killing at least seven in the latest attack on a religious minority repeatedly targeted by jihadists.

The attackers opened fire on the bus in Minya, the province's bishop told AFP.

The gunmen “killed seven people and wounded 14, all of whom

are in the Sheikh Fadel hospital in Beni Mazar” around 200 kilometres (120 miles) south of Cairo, said Bishop Makarios of Minya.

A security official confirmed the attack, adding that there were “dead and wounded”.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the shooting.

Copts, a Christian minority that make up 10 percent of Egypt’s 96 million people, have in recent years been repeatedly targeted by the The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant jihadist group.

Isil killed more than 40 people in twin church bombings in April 2017 and a month later shot dead 28 Christians in Minya province as they headed to a monastery on a bus.

Egypt’s government imposed a countrywide three-month state of emergency after the April 2017 church bombings.

In December 2017 an Isil gunman killed nine people in an attack on a church in a south Cairo suburb.

A year earlier, an Isil suicide bomber killed almost 30 worshippers at a church in Cairo located in the Saint Mark’s

Cathedral complex, the seat of the Coptic papacy.

The Egyptian army launched a major offensive in February 2018 against Isil in the Sinai Peninsula, where the group has waged a deadly insurgency since the fall of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Alongside attacks against Copts, the jihadists have killed hundreds of soldiers and policemen in Egypt in recent years and were allegedly behind a November 2017 attack against a mosque in north Sinai that killed more than 300 people.

The military offensive – Dubbed “Sinai 2018” – has killed more than 450 jihadists, according to an army estimate, while around 30 Egyptian soldiers have been killed during this year’s operation.

Egyptian authorities have also convicted jihadists for their role in attacks against Copts.

Last month an Egyptian military court sentenced 17 people to death over the suicide attacks against churches in 2016 and 2017.

Copts have long complained of discrimination in Egypt and Isil is not the only group to have launched sectarian attacks against the community.

In December 2017, hundreds of Muslims attacked a church south of Cairo that had been operating without a permit for more than a dozen years.

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Militants kill 305 at Sufi mosque in Egypt's deadliest terrorist attack

By Declan Walsh & Nour Youssef

New York Times (24.11.2017) – <http://nyti.ms/2zvE7is> – Militants detonated a bomb inside a crowded mosque in the Sinai Peninsula on Friday and then sprayed gunfire on panicked worshipers as they fled, killing at least 305 people and wounding at least 128 others. Officials called it the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history.

The scale and ruthlessness of the assault, in an area racked by an Islamist insurgency, sent shock waves across the nation – not just for the number of deaths but also for the choice of target. Attacks on mosques are rare in Egypt, where the Islamic State has targeted Coptic Christian churches and pilgrims but avoided Muslim places of worship.

The attack injected a new element into Egypt's struggle with militants because most of the victims were Sufi Muslims, who practice a mystical form of Islam that the Islamic State and other Sunni extremist groups deem heretical. And it underscored the failure of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has justified his harsh crackdown on political freedom in the name of crushing Islamic militancy, to deliver on his promises of security.

"The scene was horrific," said Ibrahim Sheteewi, a resident of Bir al-Abed, the small north Sinai town where the attack took place. "The bodies were scattered on the ground outside the mosque. I hope God punishes them for this."

Hours later, the Egyptian military carried out several airstrikes near Bir al-Abed targeting militants fleeing in four-wheel-drive vehicles, an Egyptian military official said.

On Saturday, Egypt's top prosecutor, Nabil Sadek, said in a statement that the death toll had risen and included at least 27 children. A witness said he had helped gather the bodies of 25 of them.

Between 25 and 30 militants carried out the attack, the statement said. They barged in carrying automatic weapons and the Islamic State flag.

"The perpetrators of the terrorist attack posted themselves in front of the door of the mosque and its 12 windows," the

statement said.

World leaders condemned the mosque attack, with President Trump denouncing it as “horrible and cowardly.” He said later that it explained why the United States needed a border wall with Mexico and restrictions on immigration, which he referred to as “the ban.”

Mr. Sisi has struggled to impose his authority over Sinai since he came to power in a military takeover in 2013. Islamist militants who had found a safe haven in Sinai for attacks on Israel then turned their guns on the Egyptian armed forces.

But even by recent standards in Egypt, where militants have blown up Christian worshipers as they knelt at church pews and gunned down pilgrims in buses, the attack on Friday was unusually ruthless.

“I can’t believe they attacked a mosque,” a Muslim cleric in Bir al-Abed said by phone, requesting anonymity for fear he could also be attacked.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but in the past year a local affiliate of the Islamic State has killed a number of Sufis in the area and singled out the district where the attack took place as a potential target.

The attack started midday during Friday Prayers when a bomb – probably set off by a suicide bomber, security officials said – ripped through Al Rawda mosque in Bir al-Abed, 125 miles northeast of Cairo. As worshipers fled, they were confronted by masked gunmen who, witnesses said, had pulled up outside in five four-wheel-drive vehicles.

The gunmen set fire to cars parked outside the mosque to

hinder escape, and opened fire on ambulances as they arrived on the scene, a government official said on state television.

Mayna Nasser, 40, who was shot twice in the shoulder, drifted in and out of consciousness as he was rushed to a hospital. "My children were there; my children were there," he said, according to Samy, a volunteer emergency worker who drove him there and who declined to give his last name.

Local emergency services were so overwhelmed that some of the wounded had to be transported to the hospital in the back of a cattle truck, he said.

Many were taken to the general hospital in the main northern Sinai town of El Arish, where medics described chaotic scenes as staff struggled to deal with a flood of dead and wounded, many with extensive burns or severed limbs.

"We are swamped," said one medical official, speaking by phone on condition of anonymity. "We don't know what to say. This is insane."

Other victims, like Mohammed Abdel Salam, a 22-year-old construction worker, ended up in a hospital in the nearby city of Ismailia. "I wish I never stopped to pray," he said. "I'm not even a Sufi. I was just there by accident."

Mr. Sisi convened an emergency meeting of top security officials, including the interior minister, spy chief and defense minister. "The military and the police will take revenge," he said in a televised speech.

Until a spate of attacks on Christian churches this year, Egyptian militants had avoided large-scale assaults on Egyptian civilians, perhaps because such attacks tend to

backfire. After a massacre in Luxor that killed 62 people, mostly tourists, in 1997, President Hosni Mubarak began a sweeping crackdown that crushed an Islamist insurgency centered in southern Egypt.

When a new insurgency flared in north Sinai after the military takeover in 2013, its leaders were careful to focus their attacks on uniformed security forces. But as those militants embraced the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, they have gradually set aside that lesson.

An Islamist militia in Sinai, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014 and has since proved to be one of its most effective local affiliates. The group's deadliest attack targeted a Russian jetliner that crashed shortly after takeoff from Sharm el Sheikh in 2015, killing all 224 people on board.

In an interview published in an Islamic State magazine last January, a commander in Sinai outlined the group's hatred for Sufis and their practices, including the veneration of tombs, the sacrificial slaughter of animals and what he termed "sorcery and soothsaying."

The interview, in English, identifies Rawda, the district where Friday's attack occurred, as one of three areas where Sufis live in Sinai that the group intended to "eradicate."

It featured a photograph of a black hooded figure brandishing a sword over the kneeling figure of an elderly Sufi cleric, Sulayman Abu Hiraz, who was executed in Sinai in late 2016. The Islamic State said the cleric, said to be 100 years old, had been killed for practicing witchcraft.

Many residents of Bir al-Abed, on the main road through northern Sinai, are Bedouins from the Abu Greir tribe, which

is predominantly Sufi. Residents said that despite recent Islamic State threats, the town had been largely peaceful.

The Islamic State, a Sunni movement, has long considered Sufis, along with Shiite Muslims, apostates, and has a history of attacking their mosques in other countries. Sufis may be Sunni or Shiite but most are Sunni.

Since 2016, when the militant group released a video describing Sufism as a “disease,” it has claimed attacks that have killed at least 130 worshipers at Sufi shrines, most of them in Pakistan. Elsewhere, the Islamic State has made a spectacle of bulldozing Sufi shrines, describing their removal as a form of purifying the faith.

Egyptian security forces have closely monitored Islamic State fighters returning from Syria and Iraq, amid worries that an influx of battle-hardened jihadis could insert a volatile new element into Egypt’s militant mix.

In October, Mr. Sisi ordered a major reshuffle of his security team after an ambush in the desert left at least 16 Egyptian security officials dead. That attack was later claimed by a previously unknown group called Ansar al-Islam, which is believed to have links to Al Qaeda.

Friday’s attack was a blow to Egypt’s hopes that it could stem the tide of Islamist violence in Sinai through the government’s sponsorship of a Palestinian peace initiative involving Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza.

Islamic State militants have previously used tunnels into Gaza to obtain weapons and get medical treatment for wounded fighters. One benefit for Egypt of the peace initiative, which

Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate has mediated, is greater control over those tunnels.

In a statement, Hamas denounced the attack as a "criminal explosion" that "violates all heavenly commandments and human values" because it attacked a mosque. "It is a grave challenge to Muslims worldwide," the group said.

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EGYPT: Attacks on Copts in Sinai 'a message from ISIL'

The state's 'war on terrorism' in Sinai has proved unsuccessful, say analysts.



An estimated 150 families – more than 400 people – fled their homes in El Arish [EPA]

By Farah Najjar

Al Jazeera (01.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2lWi03I> – The latest string of attacks in northern Sinai's El Arish against Coptic Christians were indirect attempts by armed groups to undermine the government, according to Egyptian experts and analysts.

Hundreds of Copts fled their homes last week after seven Copts were killed over a span of 21 days, in deadly shooting and arson attacks. An estimated 150 families – more than 400 people – began arriving at the Suez Canal city of Ismailia, the closest to El Arish, seeking refuge in the Evangelical church on Thursday.

The recent incidents have shed light and raised questions about the lack of security for residents, particularly minorities, in the peninsula. Mina Thabet, a researcher at the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, a local non-governmental organisation, described the incident as an "exodus".

"People have no sense of safety whatsoever, they've been struck with panic and are still processing the events that have been taking place," Thabet told Al Jazeera, adding that more families were expected to flee in the coming days.

Although there has been no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, fighters affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group based in the Sinai province released a video on February 19, vowing to increase attacks against the Coptic Christian minority, inciting fear among the community.

The Sinai Peninsula, a volatile desert region that is split into two governorates, north and south, has been a hotbed for various armed groups. Thabet said that public outrage at the attacks emphasised the need for a national strategy to help fight “terrorism” in the country, in steps that should be prompted by civil society groups.

“The vast majority of the Egyptian population is not impacted by the activity in Sinai, so it is easy for the central government to ignore – either because they aren’t able to address the growing violence there or because they don’t want to”

– Sarah Yerkes, Brookings Fellow and MENA expert

In 2014, following a deadly suicide bombing that left 31 soldiers killed, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared a state of emergency in the peninsula describing it as a “nesting ground for terrorism and terrorists”.

But for the 150 displaced families, the state’s vow to fight “terrorism” and end the frequent attacks has proved unsuccessful.

The fleeing families’ testimonies, said Thabet, indicate that they have been feeling unsafe ever since Sisi ousted former President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood back in 2013.

While Coptic Christians have been eminent supporters of Sisi, according to testimonies made to local media, families are now

wondering why the government remains silent, and why it is unable to protect them.

A widowed woman who lost her husband to an attack in January, told the local Al-Bedaiah news outlet: "Is this what has come of our country? The country my husband told me was dear? Where is the army that my husband left me and his children to serve?"

According to Thabet, Egypt's ministry of social solidarity told the community the current situation was "temporary".

"The reality shows otherwise," said Thabet.

In a statement made on Friday, the Coptic Church in Egypt condemned the attacks and referred to them as "acts of terrorism ... exported to Egypt from abroad", aimed at "striking our national unity".

Speaking to Al Jazeera, a Cairo-based journalist and researcher on minority groups, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, described the church's position as "weak and lenient".

"They failed to confront the situation and address the attacks in a direct manner," he said. "People expected the church to have a stronger stance."

This is not the first time Coptic Christians fled Sinai in fear of persecution. Waves of displacement have taken place in recent years, especially since a church in Rafah, a town near El Arish, was robbed and attacked several times in 2012. According to the researcher, there has long been an "undeniable" environment of discrimination against the minority.

But Sinai, following the Egyptian uprising in 2011, has witnessed widespread violence targeting not only Copts, but also police and military personnel. In July 2015, ISIL

affiliates were able to simultaneously attack multiple security and military targets, killing at least 35 people in posts located in various parts of Sinai, including El Arish and Sheikh Zuweid.

Earlier this year, a truck bomb attack and a shooting killed at least 13 people.

The constant violence on the peninsula has led to the displacement of 30,000 families, who fled Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid, and El Arish over the past two years, parliamentarian Ibrahim Abu Sahrarah of northern Sinai said in a recent televised appearance.

“I met displaced people whose families were residents of El Arish for more than 100 years – it’s all they know,” the researcher said, adding that targeting the “weak” minority is easier for the armed groups.

Through the attacks, he said, ISIL affiliates are sending a message to the state, telling them that they were successful in “changing the demographic makeup” of Sinai, which brings them a step closer to their objective of controlling territory in Egypt.

“They want to hurt the security apparatus, and one way of doing so is to have people say we are no longer provided with safety from our government”.

Similarly, Samer Shehata, a specialist in Egyptian politics, told Al Jazeera that Copts were “softer targets” for armed groups in Sinai. Prior to the latest wave of attacks, said Shehata, the state’s military and security personnel were the “preferred choice” for such groups.

“The primary target of the attacks is the Egyptian state and its ability to provide security for its citizens,” he said, adding it was difficult to know whether the attacks were politically or religiously motivated.

Shehata characterised Sinai as an area that lacks the full control of the state, “particularly around the Gaza Strip [bordering Rafah], but most likely also other remote spaces in the interior”.

Egypt’s most active armed group, calling itself the Province of Sinai, pledged allegiance to ISIL in 2014. It was previously known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. The group was formed during the security vacuum that followed the January 25 popular uprising in 2011 and has claimed numerous assaults on military personnel.

According to analysts, Egypt has treated Sinai as a threat ever since Israeli forces withdrew from the peninsula in 1982. Sinai inhabitants, including Egyptian Bedouins, have been marginalised socially, politically, and economically as a result of the threat the region poses to Egyptian security forces.

Egyptian Bedouins are seen by security forces as potential “terrorists” as opposed to full Egyptian citizens – rendering the region as underdeveloped and thus, fragile, according to Omar Ashour, an expert on Islamist movements.

But the recent wave of attacks, says one analyst, indicate that Copts are being targeted based on their religious affiliation. Sarah Yerkes, non-resident Brookings Fellow and MENA expert, told Al Jazeera that ISIL affiliates commonly target non-Muslims, and perceive Egypt’s Copts as strong allies and supporters of Sisi.

“The Sinai peninsula is notoriously hard to govern and has been overrun by various armed groups,” she said, adding that Sinai is home to armed groups due to the size of its territory, and also because it is “physically removed from Cairo”. “What happens in Sinai tends to stay in Sinai,” Yerkes said.

“The vast majority of the Egyptian population is not impacted

by the activity in Sinai, so it is easy for the central government to ignore – either because they aren't able to address the growing violence there or because they don't want to."

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EGYPT: Egypt's Coptic Christians flee Sinai after killings

Flight of families to Ismailia follows warning of attacks by ISIL and murders targeting community in El Arish.

Al Jazeera (26.02.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2munEFd> – Hundreds of members of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority have fled the Sinai Peninsula to Ismailia city, 115km northeast of the capital Cairo, following a series of killings by a local armed group.

The assailants have shot and killed at least seven Christians in separate attacks in Sinai's El Arish city in February.

At least 90 families have reached the Ismailia governorate, according to an official of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

"The government helped find housing for some families and we rented apartments for the rest," Father Kyrillos Ibrahim told DPA news agency from Ismailia on Sunday.

Each of the 90 families includes on average five members, according to him.

"It is hard to estimate if there will be more families coming, it depends how bad the situation is. We hope this is a temporary situation," Ibrahim said.

Arriving scared

Luggage, boxes of food and newly displaced people were arriving throughout Sunday at Ismailia's main youth hostel where authorities have put up 45 families.

Many rights activists say the displacement is a clear sign the government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has failed to provide a minimum of security for Sinai's Coptic Christians.

The government only agreed to put up the fleeing Christians in government housing in Ismailia after pressure on social media, which they underline as another disturbing sign.

Nabil Shukrallah of Ismailia's Evangelical Church said the families arrive scared and in need of supplies, which are being stockpiled at the church via donations from several parishes.



They are then transported to be housed in and around the city, in private homes and, now, also accommodation provided by the government.

“They’re exhausted, with urgent needs for food and children’s clothing,” he said, as one father carried off a sick infant to be evacuated by ambulance.

“They’re terrified of the violence and brutality of the terrorists.”

Largely desert, the Sinai Peninsula has seen repeated attacks from armed groups, mainly targeting security forces, since the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime leader Hosni Mubarak.

ISIL video

The flight from Sinai has intensified after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group released a video last week threatening to carry out attacks against Christians in Egypt.

It described Christians as “infidels” empowering the West against Muslims.

The area’s few Christians had been trickling out but the departures picked up after fighters killed a Christian plumber at home in front of his family on Thursday in El Arish.



At least 90 Coptic families have reached the Ismailia governorate [Ahmed Aboulenein/Reuters]

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. But Egypt's ISIL affiliate is based in north Sinai and in December carried out a suicide bombing against a Cairo church.

The Cairo church bombing and the recent killings point to a shift in ISIL's tactics in Egypt, with the group now also attacking Christian targets that are less well protected than military installations.

Before Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring uprising, about 5,000 Christians lived in northern Sinai, but the number has since dwindled to fewer than 1,000, say priests and residents.

Egypt does not keep official statistics on the number of Christians in cities or across the country.

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