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Egypt: Series of fires in their churches 'not a coincidence', say Copts

World Watch Monitor (11.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/33FqyMK> - Three Coptic churches in the Upper Egypt region were hit by fires in the last three weeks which, the Copts say, is "not a coincidence".

On Friday morning 1 November a fire started in an adjacent hall of the Mar-Girgis (St George) al-Gyoushi Church in the Shubra district of the capital Cairo; it was extinguished before causing severe damage and no-one was injured.

However, five people, two of them fire fighters, had been injured in the fire that broke out on the morning of 16 October in the Mar-Girgis Orthodox Church in Mansoura, 120 kms northeast of Cairo, two weeks earlier. The blaze completely destroyed the wooden chapel on the upper floor of the church.

Three days earlier, on Sunday evening, the famous wooden Mar Girgis Orthodox church in Cairo's southern Helwan district also went up in flames. In all three cases, investigations are still ongoing, but electrical short circuits are mentioned as possible causes.

But the Copts are not convinced.

Father Samul Mohsen, a priest at the Mar Girgis Church in Mansoura, told World Watch Monitor he was alerted by school girls screaming that the church was on fire. As he lives nearby, he immediately went to check and found "a huge fire erupting in the chapel on the upper floor of the church and the services hall attached to it. The fire started from the wooden ceiling of the adjacent hall", he said.

Fire and smoke could be seen coming from the roof of the church.

He said CCTV footage showed that something was thrown onto the roof from the vegetable market behind the church. Footage from another camera, taken at the same time, shows the start of a fire in the wooden ceiling of the service hall. The cameras are not directed at ground level and so did not record whoever might have flung something onto the roof.

The wooden chapel on the church's second floor was built in 2003 and Father Armia Iskandar, a priest at the church – an electrical engineer by profession – said that it was

unlikely an electrical short circuit had caused the fire: "When we built the church, we designed the electrical circuits in the best possible way and we make sure to switch everything off when we are not around. Also, the electricity distribution panel is equipped with devices to protect against overcurrent and high voltage rise".

'Our loss is great'

The Mar Girgis Coptic Orthodox church in Helwan, the first one to go up in flames, was a wooden structure built in 1898 by the German community and since 1971 used by the Coptic church for worship. "Our loss is great. We have lost a great historical building and we can't rebuild anything like it," Father Andrawes Azmy, a priest at the church for 30 years, told World Watch Monitor.

A couple of hours after he had left, locking the building, he received a phone call with the news that it was burning. "I immediately rushed to the church and found it on fire with heavy smoke filling the place. The old wooden building burned down very fast and the fire destroyed everything inside, even before the firefighters arrived," he said. The church leadership called in electrical engineers to check for signs of a short circuit, but they did not find any.

The next Sunday (20 October) however, the congregation was back for a mass in their burned-out church.

As all three fires are under investigation, police have not so far released further statements.

But a local source, who wished not to be named for security reasons, told WWM that shortly before the incidents, Egyptian national security had asked the churches to check their CCTV cameras to make sure that they were in working order. "This indicates that the national security had information suggesting that some churches in Egypt would be attacked," he said.

Price tag

In September nation-wide protests erupted, calling for the resignation of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi because of alleged corruption. He has also been accused of a crackdown on dissent, of jailing thousands of Islamists and activists, including journalists and bloggers.

As Sisi struggled to counter the protests, audio of a leaked phone call was broadcast on Egyptian state TV. The call which had surfaced was allegedly from the Turkish leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ali Batikh, to a group member in Egypt. In it, Batikh can be heard warning the group's members in Egypt to stay away from churches and monasteries as there are plans for attacks on them. Critics however have questioned the authenticity of the recording, saying the voice does not match that of Batikh.

Sisi came to power after he ousted the now-outlawed Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its leader, President Mohamed Morsi, in 2013.

Sisi had the support of the Coptic Church but this has come with a price tag for the Copts, who make up around 10 per cent of the population. "The Muslim Brotherhood has attacked the Copts, their churches and properties, especially in Upper Egypt, to take revenge," a Coptic human rights activist in Minya governorate, who also wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told World Watch Monitor. "At the same time [the Muslim Brotherhood] wants to show the international community that Sisi's government fails to protect Egypt's Copts and their churches, and they try to make Copts angry with Sisi," he said.

For father Ephraim Youssef, a priest at the church in Mansoura, it seems clear: both fires are cases of arson, he told World Watch Monitor. "Terrorists change their operations, from bombings to burning. They target the wooden churches that burn quickly".

Is Salafism making a comeback in Egypt?

By Rami Galal

AL-MONITOR (26.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IznUgg> - Egypt's Ministry of Religious Endowments granted on Aug. 7, for the first time since 2014, Vice President of the Salafist Call Sheikh Yasser Borhami a [preaching permit](#) for Friday sermons between Aug. 1 and Aug. 31 at Al-Kholafaa Al-Rashdeen Mosque in Alexandria.

Borhami has repeatedly [sparked controversy](#) in the past with the fatwas he issues, including one barring Muslims from sending holiday greetings to Coptic Christians, another banning people from watching soccer games and one forbidding children from decorating their bedrooms with Disney character posters.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments [issued a law](#) in June 2014, according to which only imams who are graduates of [Al-Azhar University](#) are authorized to preach, and only after [passing an interview](#) with the nationwide endowments directorates affiliated with the ministry, which in turn issue the preaching permits.

The permit granted to Borhami includes seven instructions he must follow: First, he must abide by the [unified sermon](#) imposed by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, as per its July 2014 decision. Also, Borhami must abide by the [Ash'ari doctrine](#), a moderate Islamic school of thought adopted by Al-Azhar. Second, his sermon must not exceed 15-20 minutes.

Borhami must not address any political or controversial issue in his sermon and no fatwas shall be pronounced in mosques. In addition, no religious lessons shall be given other than the Friday sermon preapproved by the ministry. Borhami must abide by the instructions issued by the ministry. He is also not allowed to move from one mosque to another unless there is prior approval from the director of the endowments directorate, the director of the department of preaching permits at the ministry and the area inspector appointed by the ministry to monitor preaching across the country. Finally, the permit shall also be considered personal property and must be preserved.

The return of Borhami to preaching has raised many questions and criticism from secular citizens in Egypt, such as intellectual [Khaled Montaser](#), and from parliamentarians such as [Nadia Henry](#). This is mainly because Borhami's fatwas in the past promoted hostility toward Copts, and he has not apologized for them. Meanwhile, Samir Sabry, a prominent Egyptian lawyer, [filed a complaint](#) against Sheikh Mohammed Khashaba, undersecretary of the Ministry of Religious Endowments in Alexandria, who granted Borhami the preaching permit.

In this regard, Abdul Moneim Shahat, the spokesman of the Salafist Call, told Al-Monitor, "Borhami holds a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies from Al-Azhar University, and he applied in this capacity for the preaching permit before the Ministry of Religious Endowments, not in his capacity as deputy head of the Salafist Call. The Ministry of Religious Endowments does not deal with organizations such as the Salafist Call, but

deals with each person as an individual by assessing them to ensure they meet the conditions required to obtain a preaching permit.”

Shahat noted, “The new measure taken by the ministry now includes its instructions — which were repeatedly published before — in the permit. What I am not sure of is whether the ministry decided on generalizing this measure to all permits, or whether it was something specific to Sheikh Borhami. But the instructions are not new, and there are no specific instructions that were only formulated for Borhami.”

He added, “The existence of a peaceful Salafist movement that rejects bloodshed and respects the tacit understandings [reached] with non-Muslims is the first guarantee to curb the spread of violence and takfiri [extremist] orientations.”

The [Salafist Call](#) was founded in Egypt in 1977. At first, its activities were limited to social and preaching work, and it refused to participate in political life. Meanwhile, the security forces were lenient toward the Salafist Call, compared to other Islamist movements, because it [the Salafist Call] did not seek to reach power and its presence undermined the Muslim Brotherhood’s monopolization of the Islamist current in the country.

But after the January 25 Revolution the situation changed. The Salafist Call formed its political wing, the Nour Party, which won 112 out of 508 seats in parliament in the 2012 legislative elections. After June 30, 2013, the movement faced increasing calls to dissolve it under the pretext that it is a religious party despite supporting the revolution. The army, however, rejected those calls as the dissolution of the Salafist Call would have changed the balance of power among Islamist currents. And thus, although the Salafist Call still enjoys political support, it came under harsh media campaigns, and ultimately faced a setback in the 2015 parliamentary elections, winning only 12 seats out of 596.

Ahmed Karima, a professor of comparative jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, told Al-Monitor, “I feel that Salafism is being swept out of Saudi Arabia to be settled in Egypt with the help of international parties and forces that do not want stability in Egypt. And while Al-Azhar University professors are not allowed to speak out and preach, Borhami, the author of radical fatwas and patron of Salafism in Egypt, is granted this permit.”

Often professors who oppose the current regime in Egypt do not receive their preaching permits from the Ministry of Religious Endowments despite meeting the conditions.

There is a tendency today to [get rid of Salafism](#) in Saudi Arabia. Several Salafist preachers, fearing the campaigns led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, have fled to Egypt and settled mainly in Alexandria, the stronghold of Salafism in Egypt.

Karima added, “Salafists led by Borhami consider all Muslims [Sufis and Shiites] who do not adhere to their ideology as apostates, and accuse Al-Azhar of corrupt beliefs for following Ash’ari doctrine. Salafism spread in Egypt through Gulf funds and the movement managed to create bases for extremist thought through [media] channels. For example, Sheikh Mohammed Hassan — a leading Salafist preacher — is building a [30-acre Islamic complex](#) in 6th of October City, with nurseries to teach children the principles of Salafism. Salafism is not a threat to [Al-Azhar](#), but a threat to Islam.”

Secretary of the parliamentary Religious Committee Amr Hamroush told Al-Monitor, “I strongly condemn the recent decision by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to grant a preaching permit to Borhami — even if such permit was for a month or subject to restrictions — because this man did not apologize for past extremist fatwas. Borhami’s thoughts have not changed, even if he pretends to abide by the provisions of the [Ministry of Religious Endowments](#) to be able to preach. Therefore, I ask the ministry to reconsider this permit and withdraw it.”

HRWF Comment: The Salafist ideology, a totalitarian ideology

The Salafist movement is often divided into three categories: the purists (or quietists), the activists and the jihadists.

"Purist Salafists" focus on non-violent preaching of Islam, education, and "purification of religious beliefs and practices". They dismiss politics as "a diversion or even innovation that leads people away from Islam". They never oppose their rulers, even in autocratic regimes.

"Activist Salafists", unlike the "purists" are engaged in political processes. They advocate political reform but eschew violence. Due to numerical superiority, the movement has been referred to as the mainstream of the Salafist movement at times.

"Jihadist Salafists" began developing an interest in armed jihad during the mid-1990s. According to Mohammed M. Hafez, a specialist on foreign fighters and suicide bombers, Salafi jihadism is an "extreme form of Sunni Islamism that rejects democracy and Shia rule."

Despite some similarities, the different contemporary self-proclaimed Salafist groups often strongly disapprove of one another and deny the other's true Islamic character.

The three branches of Salafism share the same totalitarian ideology, the one implemented by ISIS and like-minded armed movements. They share the same objective: to impose a totalitarian system of governance.

See HRWF paper: "[Islamic Minorities, A New Challenge to Religious Freedom](#)" presented at the conference [Religions and Human Rights](#)" held by the University of Padua in April 2016.

Watch Aljazeera Video Debate: [What's wrong with Islam?](#)

Coptic Christian arrested for allegedly insulting Islam on Facebook in Egypt

ChristianHeadlines.com (18.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Ne82aD> - A young Coptic Christian man has been arrested near Cairo, Egypt for allegedly insulting Islam after a hacker posted material on his Facebook page, he and family members said.

Fady Yousef, 25, was arrested early in the morning of June 11 in Giza, southwest of Cairo, despite having posted a video explaining that hackers had placed the offending material on his Facebook page, according to the Coptic Bishopric of Maghagha and El Edwa in Minya.

The previous night (June 10), Muslim extremists angry over the offending material attacked his parents' home in Eshneen el Nasara village, near Maghagha in Minya Governorate, about 260 kilometers (160 miles) south of Giza, according to a statement from the bishopric.

“On Monday [June 10] some extremists reaching a few hundred from Eshneen el Nasara village and the villages around it attacked the home of Yousef Todary,” the statement from Bishop Anba Aghathon read. “They entered and destroyed the contents of the house, then moved to the house next door where his brother lived and attacked it from the outside. They were shouting against the Christian religion and the Copts of the village.”

Yousef Todary, his wife and daughter were able to escape minutes before the Muslim extremists broke in and destroyed the refrigerator, television set, mattresses, furniture and windows, according to the bishop.

Stating that Muslim extremists alleged the post was insulting to Islam, the bishop defended Fady Yousef, reiterating that he said his Facebook was hacked.

The young Copt posted an apology on the page saying he would never do such a thing, and that people who knew him know this well. His sister, Nermeen Yousef, also posted a clarification, saying her brother apologized not because he did anything wrong, but because people mistakenly believed that he was the author of the post, according to Copts United.

“He is apologizing because he respects your feelings,” she wrote. “He is not a child to do such a thing, and also his friends are Muslims and always tell me they are dear to him and they know this well.”

Along with Fady Yousef, police also detained his brother and uncle; two other uncles turned themselves in as soon as they heard that police sought them, according to various sources. They were all transported to Minya pending investigations, and on Friday (June 15) Copts United reported that the brother and uncles had been released.

Yousef is in custody facing charges of posting material offensive to religion, according to Copts United. Insulting a heavenly religion (Islam, Judaism and Christianity) in Egypt, where the state religion is Islam, is punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine of 500 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$30 to US\$60), according to Article 98(f) of the Penal Code.

Police reportedly arrested 25 people suspected of attacking the home of Yousef Todary and those of other Christians in the village, as well as others who wrote posts on social media to instigate attacks.

Police reportedly dispersed angry crowds and set up protective posts in Eshneen el Nasara and other villages. They also set a protective perimeter around the village the following Friday (June 14) in anticipation of possible violence, according to Copts United.

The bishop’s statement noted that Reda Eid, a Muslim from the same village, during Easter posted derogatory words against Christianity, the church and its leadership. Eid later went to the church leaders to apologize, taking some of his Christian friends with him, according to the statement. Father Soliman responded “You are our son, you came here and I accept your apology, we are all brothers,” thus ending the incident, according to Copts United.

Egypt ranked 16th on Open Doors’ 2019 World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

Christians in Egypt attacked by civilians twice in one week

By Marlo Safi

National Review (12.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Iblrvq> - While attacks on Christians in Egypt such as bombings of churches by Islamists break into our news cycles in the U.S., smaller attacks often go without making much of an impression in our media. Large-scale attacks, such as the Palm Sunday church bombings of 2017 where 44 people were killed, aren't as frequent as the attacks on Egypt's Coptic community by regular Egyptians. Copts — Christians in Egypt that trace their ancestry back to the ancient Egyptians and their faith to St. Mark the Apostle — have faced violent transgression by fellow civilians toward their homes in the last week alone.

Last week in a town called Samalot in the Egyptian province of Minya, a Coptic Christian woman who had converted to Islam returned to her parent's village as part of a celebration of her conversion. The mob of Egyptians turned violent, throwing rocks at Coptic homes while yelling obscenities at them. Cars and other property were destroyed. Police arrested eight Copts in an effort to end the violence — less than one week later, similar discriminatory actions by police following violence from civilians toward Copts occurred again.

On Monday, in the village of Ishnien Al Nasara in Minya, three Coptic homes were destroyed following rumors that a Copt had "insulted religion" on Facebook, despite Copts refuting the accusation that the young Coptic man alleged to have broken blasphemy laws had written anything abusive. According to a partner of U.S.-based Coptic advocacy group Coptic Voice, police arrested the individual that wrote the post for being in violation of blasphemy laws. The perpetrators who burned the homes, however, were not arrested.

This is the reality for Copts in Egypt today — they face not only the threat from terror groups such as ISIS, but also daily harassment or assault from fellow Egyptians, who view Christians as unclean and heretic, and who often spread false rumors. Sara Salama, president of Coptic Voice, tells National Review that these recent incidents are nothing new, and that Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has improved the public rhetoric about Christians in the country by encouraging peaceful coexistence, must take more action on the ground to provoke positive change.

For example, in early June President Sisi delivered a speech to Muslim Egyptians during Ramadan in which he encouraged them to be "understanding" of Christians in Egypt, and congratulate them on the opening of their churches.

When we wish our Christian brothers a happy feast or [congratulate them] on building new churches, we represent our religion," he said, noting that such gestures are not meant to show off. "There is a big difference between practicing and understanding the religion," he added.

Salama remarks on the improvement of rhetoric, but is skeptical of its effects. "While the upgrade in public rhetoric on religious tolerance coming out of Egypt's presidential office is important in and of itself, it has not lead to a positive change in the situation on the ground," Salama says. "The main issue here is that of accountability." She notes that police often act more as bystanders than individuals tasked with protecting Egyptian citizens, especially Copts.

In Defense of Christians, a non-profit and non-partisan human-rights and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. that advocates for the rights of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East, tells National Review that Egyptian police “should be protecting everyone against criminal acts” but instead “arrested the victims in an evil and twisted form of justice.”

“IDC demands that President Sisi back his noble words about the equality of all Egyptians with actions to reform Minya province. Such incidents against a vulnerable religious minority should not be tolerated anywhere in the world, especially not in an ally country of the United States.”

Egyptian govt legalizes 900 churches in three years

New law replaces the 1934 legislation that made the construction of new churches subject to ten conditions

By Arnaud Bevilacqua

La Croix International (15.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GwjKQX> - President Abdel Fattah al Sissi's Egyptian government legalized more than 100 Christian churches - 111 to be precise - in March this year.

This makes a total of 984 centers of Christian worship centers that have been legalized, restored or built over the last three years.

Law of August 2016

A new law on worship dating from August 2016 provides the framework for the process of legalizing and authorizing the building of new churches.

Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church gave its backing to the new law following months of tension with the al Sissi government. The new law replaced 1934 legislation that made the construction of new churches subject to ten conditions.

According to the old rules, building a church - in contrast to a mosque - required compliance with numerous conditions relating to the distance from schools, canals, government buildings, railways and residential zones.

Moreover, even when authorization to build was obtained, a project often remained in suspense if it failed obtain the consent of local communities.

In many cases, the rigid application of the rules prevented the building of churches in cities and villages inhabited by Christians, particularly in rural areas in Upper Egypt.

It also led to the spontaneous establishment of places of worship without the necessary authorizations.

Discrimination continues

As a result, Christians were regularly suspected of building churches without permits. The Coptic Orthodox Church has long hoped that a new law would put an end to these conflict situations.

Islamist groups often made use of these situations to attack Christians with greater or lesser virulence and sometimes carry out their threats.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Initiative for Individual Rights, a local human rights organization, published a report in November 2018 that strongly criticized the 2016 law governing the building of churches.

The report concluded that 15 Christian worship centers had experienced incidents and nine of these had been definitively closed between September 2017 and October 2018.

Government aims to win over Coptic community

The Copts are one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, making up 8 to 10% of the Egyptian population, i.e. 8 million people.

Often targeted by the local branch of ISIS, the Coptic minority also receives significant attention from President al Sissi whose authoritarianism is subject to regular criticism.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian president has sought to present himself as the defender of the Coptic Church, often promising support to the community.

Thus, in January, he attended Coptic Christmas celebrations and the inauguration of the new Cathedral of the Nativity on the site of the new Egyptian administrative capital, which is currently under construction in the desert near Cairo.

Muslim throng converges on worship site of Coptic Church in Egypt

Priests evicted, building shuttered.

Morning Star News (19.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2VPtiU6> - Police in Upper Egypt evicted Coptic priests and shuttered their church building after an Islamist mob converged on the site over the weekend, according to reports.

Muslim villagers in Manshiyet Zaafarna, Minya Governorate, attacked the church of MarGiris (St. George) at 1:30 p.m. on Friday (Jan. 11), after mosque noon prayers, according to a statement by the office of the Bishop of Minya and Abu-Qurqas, headed by Coptic Orthodox Bishop General of Minya Anba Makarios.

The next day, according to the bishop's statement as cited by Watani News, a mob of about 1,000 Muslim villagers descended upon the church building, demanding that it be closed.

A video posted on Facebook shows a narrow street packed with male protestors chanting "Leave, leave," as well as Islamic chants such as, "No other God other than Allah."

Police pacified the mob by giving into their demands, according to Watani. They evicted two priests and the few remaining congregants inside and closed the building, which brought an elated response from the crowd.

"It appears to indicate that extremists now hold the upper hand," Makarios said in the statement, "and appeasing them is the way out of problems."

The statement pointed out that this latest closure is especially disappointing in the wake of claims by high-ranking government officials that they support freedom of religion in the country.

"This comes in the wake of declarations by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, in favor of churches, also positive talk and actions by President Abdel-Fattah a-Sisi that every Egyptian has the right to practice his or her religion of choice, and to Coptic Pope Tawadros's efforts on that front," read the statement, according to Watani.

The village, which is about 250 kilometers (155 miles) south of Cairo, is home to about 1,000 Copts, according to church officials.

Harassment against the church started on Coptic Orthodox Christmas Eve about a week earlier, when Muslim protestors barged into the church building hours after a special service.

"As long as there is no deterrent action, others will be encouraged to behave in the same manner [and get away with it]," the bishop's statement said. Makarios has consistently voiced objections to many closed churches in Minya Governorate.

This month, three churches have been closed in Minya Governorate, according to the news site Copts Today. Days before the one in Manshiyet Zaafarna, a place of worship was closed in Al-Mansour village, and not long before that, one in the city of Minya, according to the report. Watani has also reported on closures in the village of Sultan Basha in Minya last summer.

The media center for the Egyptian Cabinet made a statement denying news reports that three churches closed in Minya in response to angry Muslims. The statement stressed that authorities encourage freedom of worship as it is guaranteed in the law and the constitution of the country. It added that news reports were only rumors that aim to divide the country.

Ishak Ibrahim, of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, confirmed the closure in Manshiyet Zaafarna, according to advocacy group Coptic Solidarity. Ibrahim told Coptic Solidarity that the sectarian violence in Minya may be due to the high number of Christians there, as well as area poverty.

"This may be the only space available for people to vent their anger against the state," he said. "They are taking it out ...on the weakest link, the Christians."

Egypt's Christians face discriminatory laws in building and maintaining houses of worship, which give Muslims a pretext to attack the churches, according to human rights advocates. Assailants are not properly prosecuted under the law, but rather matters go to formal "reconciliation meetings" in which community elders gather to discuss a compromise, which usually ends in Christians losing their worship rights, rights advocates say.

A church building law passed in 2016 with the hope that it would bring equality to Christians, but it was badly written, implemented poorly and perpetuated many of the discriminatory policies, they say.

Egypt ranked 17th on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.
