

Egypt's Christians Caught in Cross Fire

Seen as supporting the military's ouster of Mohamed Morsi, they're finding churches burned and cars ablaze

By Lauren E. Bohn

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Drenched in sweat and covered in ash, 24-year-old Miriam Nagi has spent the past eight days mopping soot inside St. George's Church.

She's cleaning up after a fire raged there last week, turning a once gleaming Egyptian spiritual center into a postapocalyptic backdrop of ruin and despair.

"The terrorists tried to ruin my church, my home, my people," Nagi says, using the edge of her charcoaled sleeve to wipe tears from her eyes. "But God will prevail against the terrorist Muslim Brothers."

St. George's Church in Assiut, 320 km south of Cairo, was one of more than 60 churches attacked in a wave of revenge against Christians after the military's bloody dispersal of two Islamist protest camps in Cairo this month, which killed hundreds of supporters of the ousted President. Egypt's Christians, who make up about 10% of the Muslim-majority country, have been caught in the political cross fire and found themselves scapegoats for supporting the military's ouster of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Outside St. George's, traces of a low-decibel civil war ring out across the long-neglected city of Assiut, a dusty Islamist stronghold that is home to a robust Christian minority. Scores of cars owned by Christians have been set ablaze, their skeletons still lingering on the city's narrow roads as reminders of a derailed popular uprising that once awed the world just 2½ years ago. Church walls have been emblazoned with "Morsi is my President" graffiti and buildings have been tagged "Boycott Nesaara," an Arabic term for Christians that's taken on a derogatory air.

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Amid a heavy military-led crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, with many leaders now jailed, Egypt's government and media have declared a war on terrorism, blaming the organization for coordinating nationwide attacks on churches and police stations. The military-installed government has used the attacks as fuel for their high-octane campaign against the once triumphant Brotherhood, but some have cast doubt on whether the Brotherhood was directly behind the attacks. And some have rebuked security forces for doing more to publicize and leverage the incidents — than prevent them.

"For weeks, everyone could see these attacks coming, with Muslim Brotherhood members accusing Coptic Christians of a role in [Morsi's] ouster, but the authorities did little or nothing to prevent them," John Storm, acting Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement on Thursday. The organization documented 42 church attacks, a majority in which security forces were absent before and during the attack.

When Father Boles Beshay of St. Michael's Church in Assiut saw an angry mob at his church's gate, he said he called his police contacts, but no one answered. The priest and other members of the congregation say the mob removed a crucifix from the church's gates, stomping on it and attempting to enter the church compound with gasoline. He said if it weren't for the intervention of a local Muslim man, the church would have been burned just like the other three down the street.

"It's odd why the police didn't answer me, why they didn't come," he says with a nervous laugh. "I know they were busy fighting terrorism across the country, but I do think it's strange. But at the end of the day,

I've seen all the videos on television, and know who was behind these attacks. Christians are always the victims."

For their part, Brotherhood leaders have condemned the attacks, and vehemently denied their involvement.

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"These are the same tools that Mubarak used to strengthen his regime," says Galal Abdel Sadek, who heads the Muslim Brotherhood in Assiut. "For years he acted like he protected the Christians, but he just used them to politically divide his own people. And it worked." He says fifteen senior members in Assiut have been arrested in the past week alone.

The Gama'a Islamiya, one of Egypt's most historically conservative and violent groups, which has since [renounced violence](#), also stands by the Brotherhood's claims of innocence.

"Islamists have nothing to do with this," says one member who refused to meet in person for fear of arrest and said he's since relocated outside Assiut after security forces ransacked other members' homes. "Who do these attacks benefit? The answer is easy, and it's not us."

But conflicting rhetoric from the Brotherhood — mostly in Arabic corners of the Web seemingly far from their frequent English blitzes to Western media — underscore the deep distrust Egyptians now have in an organization that won a series of post-Mubarak elections.

On the day of the attacks, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party Helwan branch posted a statement on the group's Facebook page lambasting Pope Tawadros II, the religious leader of the Egyptian Coptic community, for advocating Morsi's removal and accused him of sponsoring groups to storm mosques. "After all this people ask why they burn the churches," the statement read. "For every action there is a reaction."

Over the past year, some Muslim clerics have dialed up their vitriol against Christians in inflammatory tirades — [like one](#) in which Safwat Hegazy, a Brotherhood supporter, warned Christians not to join mounting opposition forces against Morsi. "Our redline is Morsi's legitimacy," he warned in a speech several months ago. "Whoever dares splash it with water, we will splash him with blood." According to Egyptian media, he was arrested on Wednesday, en route to Libya.

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Many Christians in Egypt, especially in the rural south, say the attacks are part of a long and painful history of systemic discrimination and sectarian violence in Egypt.

Despite long-standing Egyptian denial, sectarian angst is deeply rooted in society, said Michael Hanna, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation research institute in New York City. Copts are underrepresented across Egypt's public sphere, in its judiciary, diplomatic corps, academia and almost all electoral bodies. What's more, Christians face state-imposed restrictions on the right to build and maintain churches, regulations that Muslims don't face when building mosques.

"There is a wound in my heart, always, from living in Egypt as a Christian, as a second-class citizen," says Youssef Sidhoum, editor of the Coptic newspaper *al-Watani*.

"The attacks from the Muslim Brotherhood are painful, and I don't want to underestimate the pain I feel, but we must move on," he says. "Now isn't the time to cry. We must protect the national solidarity of June 30, the day we took down Morsi ... the day the revolution became alive again against terrorism."

But the revolution feels more like a bygone dream in Minya, a neglected region 240 km south of Cairo, where Christians make up almost 35% of the population. Tucked away in a tiny trash-strewn maze of crumbling buildings, not far from two recently burned churches, Evon Loga Gabrieleul stood at the gravesite of her son, whom she calls “one of Egypt’s most gentle martyrs.”

Seventeen-year-old Ayman Labib, a Christian, was beaten to death two years ago by Muslim classmates in a murder case that punctuates long-standing social tensions between Christians and Muslims in southern Egypt. Two boys have been convicted of his death and are now serving three-year prison sentences — hardly justice, the community says, for a life lost and others irreversibly shattered.

“I’m not saying Mubarak was good,” Evon says, while stroking a pocket-size cross. “But he was right when he warned us against these people. He was right when he locked them away.”

(PHOTOS: [Clashes Erupt in Egypt as Protesters March Against Earlier Bloodshed](#))

The Labib family said they’re desperately trying to seek political asylum. They have tried to visit the American embassy in Cairo, but unreliable trains to the capital have been halted, and with a state-imposed national curfew of 7 p.m., a five-hour drive to the capital is often impossible. For Nabil, Ayman’s father, missing work for even a few days takes a severe toll on the impoverished family of five (more than 40% of Egyptians earn less than \$2 a day).

Since last week’s attacks, the family says they’ve only left their tiny apartment for work and small errands, secluding themselves a bit more each day, more out of melancholy than fear.

Sitting under an Egyptian flag, sun-starched and pallid, Ayman’s older brother Antonius peered at his late brother’s notebooks still stacked neatly as though he’d return at any moment to pore over them. The family had hoped Ayman, a shining academic star of the village, would be the first from the family to attend college — a rare ticket out of a village weighed down by postponed aspirations, soon curdled and long forgotten.

“They kill my brother, they kill my churches,” he says. “A revolution? We never had a revolution. Too many people are lying to themselves. Too many people are sleeping for this to be a revolution.”

Through one of the family’s few windows, the village’s church bells rang, marking another day — one no different than the last for a family, and a country, struggling to stay awake.

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