



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 11, 2011

Muslim Mob Kills 12 Christians in Attack on Church in Egypt

Essam Sharaf, Egypt's prime minister since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak on March 3, 2011, convened an emergency cabinet meeting after 12 people were killed in Cairo when deadly violence broke out between Muslims and Christians over the alleged conversion of a Christian woman to Islam.

As reported by various news outlets, a mob of about 500 ultra-conservative Muslims known as Salafists gathered Saturday outside the Saint Mina Church in Imbaba, a suburb of Cairo. The enraged crowd demanded that the Christians at the church release a woman they insisted had converted to Islam but was being kept captive by the leadership of the church.



The core of the group consisted of Salafists. Salafism is associated with a literalist approach to Islamic theology. A small branch of Salafis espouse violent jihad (holy war) against the West and against all non-literal interpretations of the Quran. They are an extreme cohort of Sunni Muslims that oppose popular government and more ostensibly moderate Shia rulers.

The Imbaba mob, while mostly Salafist, was composed of like-minded Muslims who sought entrance to the church to verify whether the ersatz convert was being held inside. The mob responded to resistance with guns, bombs, and arson.

Armed soldiers and police attempted to restore order by firing shots in the air and deploying tear gas to disperse the crowd. While the efforts were somewhat successful, the crowd simply relocated to nearby alleys and continued harassing Christians, throwing rocks until the early morning hours.

Law enforcement was vexed by a power outage that left the area in complete darkness and provided natural camouflage to the mob.

Christianity is a minority religion in Egypt. Most (over 95 percent) Egyptian Christians are known as Copts or [Coptic Christians](#). (An article in [Wikipedia](#) notes, however, that "the Egyptian Christian community now also includes other [Christian](#) denominations such as [Protestants](#) [known in Arabic as Evangelicals], [Roman](#) and [Eastern Rite Catholics](#), and other [Orthodox](#) congregations.") The sect is native to Egypt and accounts for about 10 percent of the population. The word "Copt" is derived from the Greek name for the native Egyptian population in Roman Egypt. After the Muslim conquest, the designation was applied exclusively to those Egyptians continuing to profess the Christian faith.

The history of Christianity in Egypt dates to the days when Rome ruled the known world. Alexandria was an important and influential Christian city (home to many of the early church fathers) and was the center of the religion from the 4th century until the Muslim conquest in AD 640. In fact, until Islamists conquered the ancient land, Egypt was predominantly Christian.



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During the night, another church, Saint Mary's, was set ablaze by a similar violent mob bent on using any criminal means to accomplish their goal of "rescuing" the woman from her Christian "captors."

In the aftermath of such violent and deadly clashes, congregants now fear for their lives.

As [related](#) by MSNBC:

"My son attends this church. How can we ever feel safe?" said Nashaat Boshra, who stood crying in front of Saint Mary's on Sunday. "This is religious strife facilitated by the army and police. Let's just face the truth."

This attack on Christians wasn't the first for Egypt. On March 9, 13 people were killed during violent sectarian clashes after another Coptic church was destroyed by fire bombs thrown by Muslim protestors.

Youssef Sidhom, editor of the Coptic newspaper *al-Watani*, believes that Salafist jihadists are spreading rumors of thwarted conversions as way of generating public support for their campaign against Christians throughout the Muslim world.

"They want to assert themselves in the political arena, and their means to do so is to highlight rumors of conversion cases of ladies," Sidhom said Sunday. "That is their way of creating a buzz."

Despite official reports of a strong-armed crackdown on the mob by police and military, Sidhom echoes the belief held by many Copts that the security forces put on merely a pantomime of protection, while in reality passively permitting jihadists to carry out their destructive and deadly plan.

"From Saturday afternoon, there were signs that this was going on," Sidhom said. "The police were alerted, but they did nothing to stop this."

Perhaps in an effort to refute the accusation of tacit complicity on the part of security squads, the streets in the area around the church were patrolled by armed military units, including tanks rumbling through the neighborhood. Overall the atmosphere was calm, except for small bursts of gunfire Sunday morning.

In a statement posted on its Facebook page (yes, the Egyptian army has a Facebook page), an army spokesman said 190 people suspected of participating in the demonstrations would be tried by a military tribunal: "The Supreme Military Council decided to send all those who were arrested in yesterday's events, that is 190 people, to the Supreme Military Court...."

It appears that the crescendo of deadly demonstrations has caught the military without their boots on. While such clashes are not unknown in Egypt, the volume and violence of such have increased significantly since the Mubarak regime was overthrown.

Michael Mounir, a Christian activist, said Salafist jihadists want to inculcate residents of this poor section of the Cairo metro area in the belief that they, not the armed forces, are the real authority. They remind the majority Muslim population that the generals who lead this army were appointed by Hosni Mubarak, whose administration was openly and adamantly secular.

"The Salafists have managed to show that the army is weak and that the army is unable to distinguish between democracy and freedom of opinion and thuggery," Mounir said. "This is clearly thuggery."

Egypt has always been the scene of violent sectarian strife, particularly in the wake of tales of Coptic men and women who wish to convert to Islam but are being actively prevented from doing so by the Christian leadership.



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The *Washington Post* outlined the history of the conflict in a recent [article](#):

The controversy over the conversions began two years ago when a woman married to a Coptic priest was reported to be having marital problems. Muslim leaders charged that Copts were holding her against her will because she was attempting to convert to Islam — an allegation Copts have denied.

The woman, Camilla Shehata, gave an interview televised Saturday in which she said she remained a Christian and disputed that she had attempted to convert to Islam.

After the interview aired, Coptic leaders said, Muslims in Imbaba began to assert that Christians were holding a second woman hostage to prevent her from converting to Islam.

The original controversy and others like it were cited as the motive in the Oct. 31 attack on a Syriac Catholic church in Baghdad that killed more than 51 people. Tensions also were heightened after a New Year's Eve bombing outside a church in the Egyptian coastal city of Alexandria that killed more than 20 people.

The emergency cabinet meeting called by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf required him to postpone a scheduled tour of Gulf states.

Interested religious officials were responding with emergency meetings of their own. Egypt's highest religious authority, Al-Azhar, held a conference to discuss the causes and effects of the clashes. The governor of Giza province, where the church lies, said relatives of the dead and injured would receive a cash settlement from the government to compensate them for the deaths of their family members.

According to details of the attacks broadcast by official Egyptian media outlets, in addition to the 12 fatalities there were 186 people injured, with two in critical condition in a hospital. Additionally, the state-run press reported that one of those murdered in the attack was found inside the church, apparently killed by shotgun fire.

Photo: Egyptian Coptic Christians protest the recent attacks on Christians and churches, in front of the state television building in Cairo, May 9, 2011: AP Images



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