

In August 2013 Egypt's Coptic Christians, which make up around 10% of the population, were targeted in an extreme surge of sectarian violence because of their perceived support for the overthrow of then-President Mohammed Morsi. The wave of attacks occurred after August 14, 2013, following the dispersal of two large sit-in protests of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Cairo.

#### Coptic Christians in Egypt

- Copts are Christians native to Egypt who constitute a major religious group within the country and are the largest group of Christians in the Middle East. Coptic Christians are Egypt's largest religious minority and number between 10 and 20% (estimates vary) of the country's overall population of more than 86 million people.<sup>1,2</sup> The vast majority of Egypt's Christians are Coptic and most follow the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria,<sup>3</sup> whose current leader is Pope Tawadros II. The Coptic Church's teachings are based on those of St Mark, who brought Christianity to Egypt during the reign of Emperor Nero during the first century A.D.<sup>4</sup>
- They have maintained a strong religious identity throughout Egyptian history and have worked alongside Muslims in creating modern Egypt since 1922. Since Gamel Abdel Nasser's coup in 1952, no Copts have held a key cabinet position in government and Copts have been underrepresented in all parliaments, in addition to facing underrepresentation in the academic and public sectors.<sup>5</sup>

#### Violence against Coptic Christians before July 2013

- Christian-Muslim tensions had intensified, sometimes manifesting in dangerous clashes, after President Hosni Mubarak was removed from power in 2011.<sup>6,7</sup> Records indicate that President Mohammed Morsi had spoken positively about the rights of Coptic Christians and promised to protect their rights,<sup>8,9</sup> although sectarian tensions towards the Coptic community had persisted and before his removal on July 3, 2013 violence had broken out at St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, the seat of the Orthodox Pope and the largest cathedral in Egypt,<sup>10</sup> in April.
- On Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April, fighting erupted at St Mark's Cathedral following a mass funeral for five Christians who had been killed in clashes with Muslims two days before at a Coptic church in El Khusus, in which a Muslim had also died. One person was killed in the siege and more than 80 were wounded in the violence, which escalated when some Christians retaliated to the mob attack, reportedly as thousands of Christians were trying to leave after the service. The church compound was attacked with rocks, broken masonry and fireworks among others.<sup>11 12 13 14</sup>

*"For weeks, everyone could see these attacks coming, with Muslim Brotherhood members accusing Coptic Christians of a role in Mohammad Morsi's ouster, but the authorities did little or nothing to prevent them."*  
**Joe Stork, acting Middle East Director at Human Rights Watch**<sup>23</sup>

#### Violence against Coptic Christians after the Ousting of President Morsi in July 2013

- When President Mohammed Morsi was ousted on July 3, 2013, attacks against Coptic Christians, who some blamed for supporting the protests that led to the change in government,<sup>15</sup> by Islamists increased, with churches becoming a flash-point of anti-Coptic attacks.<sup>16</sup> The violence came to a head in an unprecedented wave of sectarian attacks after the dispersal of two pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo on August 14, 2013.<sup>17</sup>

*Estimates say between thirty-eight and forty-two churches were destroyed after the removal from power of then-President Mohammed Morsi.*

- On August 14, 2013 and the days following, Human Rights Watch documented forty-two cases of attacks against churches by supporters of Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, which left four people dead. Attackers torched and looted many churches across Egypt, with a majority of the attacks occurring in Upper Egypt and in Minya in particular, and the governorates of Minya, Fayum, Giza, Suez, Sohag, Bani Suef and North Sinai among the affected.<sup>18</sup> The campaign group Maspero Youth Union claimed that at least thirty-seven churches had been burned or destroyed and a further 23 had been damaged.<sup>19</sup>

- In addition, Christian institutions, property and businesses were also targeted by those angry that the church was not siding with then-President Morsi. Some Muslim Brotherhood members condemned the violence, although opinion was divided, as others "suggested a Coptic role in the ongoing crackdown on the group".<sup>20</sup> In addition, some Muslim Brotherhood members blamed the government for the atrocities.<sup>21</sup> Egyptian security forces were largely absent or have failed to intervene, and have since come under intense scrutiny for their lacking role in combating the violence.<sup>22</sup>

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