



MAR Background Report: Religious Violence in Egypt

Amid the changes sweeping across Egypt, there are signs of increasing tensions between the majority Muslim and minority Coptic populations. Coptic Christians in Cairo blocked a highway on March 8 to protest the previous week's burning of a church. The rally angered Muslims who wanted to pass, and both sides began throwing stones until the army intervened in the clash. At least one person, a Coptic Christian, died in the violence. The clash occurred in the poor working-class district of Moqattam. Elsewhere in Cairo, at least 1,000 Copts protested.

On March 5, a mob of nearly 4,000 Muslims attacked Coptic homes in the village of Sol, 30 miles outside Cairo. The Shahedain (Two Martyrs) Church was torched, those inside either killed in the fire or kidnapped, and the mob prevented the fire brigade from reaching the scene. The army, stationed nearby, initially refused to enter the village, and two days later Muslim leaders sent away military assistance. The incident was reportedly triggered by a relationship between a Muslim woman and a Coptic man in the village.

According to the Minorities at Risk project, Copts are indigenous Egyptian Christians, with most belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Although Copts have enjoyed a relative measure of economic well-being during Egypt's history, they face discrimination in other areas, such as university admissions and in receipt of public spending. They are overrepresented in the bureaucracy and the military but underrepresented in the upper levels of these institutions and within Egypt's political structures, and completely absent from the judiciary. As reported by MAR, targeted religious discrimination has restricted Christian broadcasting, public speech, and holiday celebrations, though some improvements have been noted. For example, although Copts still resent that they must have government permission to build churches, no requests have been denied since 2001. Coptic cultural grievances center on continued restriction of religion and freedom of threats from other groups.

In January, a Muslim was sentenced to death for the pre-meditated murders of six Coptic Christians and a Muslim policeman. Two weeks prior to the murders, a suicide bomber killed 23 people at a Coptic Church in Alexandria. Especially given the fragile nature of the revolutionary Egyptian state, it is likely that unfettered violence will continue. In light of the reform movement, it is also important to emphasize the inclusion of Copts in the democratization process and a guarantee of protection for minority rights. Historically, Copts have not mobilized politically, and their communal interests are primarily represented by the Orthodox Church, so standing up to violence or finding a voice in the new government may prove difficult and leave the Copts vulnerable to future violence.



About the Minorities at Risk Project

The Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project, based at the University of Maryland, monitors and analyzes the status and conflicts of politically-active communal groups in countries with a current population of at least 500,000. The project is designed to provide information in a standardized format that aids comparative research and contributes to the understanding of conflicts involving relevant groups. Selected project materials on more than 283 groups (the MAR database and codebook as well as detailed historical chronologies) are available on the [project's website](#) for researchers, public officials, journalists, students, activists, and others interested in the topic. The project also has collected data on 118 ethnopolitical organizations representing MAR groups in the Middle East and North Africa.



Minorities at Risk Project
www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar

Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM)
Center for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)
0145 Tydings Hall, University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

