

## Commentary Magazine - Persecution of Christians in the Middle East

By Peter Wehner

At Saints Church in Alexandria, Egypt, 21 Coptic Christians were killed and nearly 100 wounded at a New Year's Mass bombing. "The last thing I heard was a powerful explosion and then my ears went deaf," Marco Boutros, 17, said from his hospital bed where he was being treated for wounds. "All I could see were body parts scattered all over, legs and bits of flesh."

The New York Times reports:

The bombing early on Saturday morning climaxed the bloodiest year in four decades of sectarian tensions in Egypt, beginning with a Muslim gunman's killings of nine people outside another midnight Mass, at a church in the city of Nag Hammadi on Jan. 6, the Coptic Christmas.

Analysts said the weekend bombing was in a sense the culmination of a long escalation of violence against Egypt's Coptic Christians, who make up about 10 percent of the population. But at the same time the blast's planning and scale – a suicide bomber evidently detonated a locally made explosive device packed with nails and other shrapnel, the authorities said Sunday – were a break with the smaller episodes of intra-communal violence that have marked Muslim-Christian relations for the past decade.

Egyptian officials believe the attacks seemed at least inspired by al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups; Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said it was the work of "foreign fingers." But the attack may have been executed by local Egyptians. And writing after the bombing on Ahram Online, its editor, Hani Shukrallah, penned these powerful, ominous words:

We are to join in a chorus of condemnation. Jointly, Muslims and Christians, government and opposition, Church and Mosque, clerics and laypeople — all of us are going to stand up and with a single voice declare unequivocal denunciation of al-Qaeda, Islamist militants, and Muslim fanatics of every shade, hue and color; some of us will even go the extra mile to denounce salafi Islam, Islamic fundamentalism as a whole, and the Wahabi Islam which, presumably, is a Saudi import wholly alien to our Egyptian national culture.

And once again we're going to declare the eternal unity of "the twin elements of the nation," and hearken back the Revolution of 1919, with its hoisted banner showing the crescent embracing the cross, and giving symbolic expression to that unbreakable bond.

Much of it will be sheer hypocrisy; a great deal of it will be variously nuanced so as to keep, just below the surface, the heaps of narrow-minded prejudice, flagrant double standard and, indeed, bigotry that holds in its grip so many of the participants in the condemnations.

All of it will be to no avail. We've been here before; we've done exactly that, yet the massacres continue, each more horrible than the one before it, and the bigotry and intolerance spread deeper and wider into every nook and cranny of our society. It is not easy to empty Egypt of its Christians; they've been here for as long as there has been Christianity in the world. Close to a millennium and half of Muslim rule did not eradicate the nation's Christian community, rather it maintained it sufficiently strong and sufficiently vigorous so as to play a crucial role in shaping the national, political and cultural identity of modern Egypt.

Yet now, two centuries after the birth of the modern Egyptian nation state, and as we embark on the second decade of the 21st century, the previously unheard of seems no longer beyond imagining: a Christian-free Egypt, one where the cross will have slipped out of the crescent's embrace, and off the flag symbolizing our modern national identity. I hope that if and when that day comes I will have been long dead, but dead or alive, this will be an Egypt which I do not recognize and to which I have no desire to belong.

These attacks in Egypt come amid a new campaign of violence against Iraqi Christians, who are being forced to flee to northern Iraq or abroad because of growing fear that the country's security forces are unable or unwilling to protect them.

This is a deeply disquieting turn of events. One of the challenges of Muslim societies is to show that they are able to co-exist with, and respect the rights of, Christian minorities. In many Islamic societies, like Saudi Arabia, the record is beyond dismal. And now some nations, like Egypt and Iraq, appear to be moving in the wrong direction, with persecution increasing.

This matter is complicated by the fact that in both Egypt and Iraq, the governments are speaking out against Christian persecution. But the question is whether there is sufficient will to enforce the words of empathy and outrage. It's far from clear that it is.

On the matter of persecution, those of the Christian faith were warned by their founder, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." The Cross is an offense, St. Paul wrote in the book of Corinthians. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you," St. Peter, who was martyred in Rome during the reign of Nero, wrote. "But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy."

These are comforting words for a persecuted people. And whatever exceeding joy may await those whose blood has been shed because of their faith, governments, including our own, have an obligation to take steps to protect the basic rights of their citizens — people of all faiths and people of no faith at all. Those in position of authority need to do much more than they are to protect those enduring the fiery trial. Certainly religious persecution needs to rise as a priority of American foreign policy.

As one Egyptian worshipper said on Saturday, “Why would my son or brother go to celebrate the mass by prayer, not by drinking or doing drugs or anything like that, but by praying in the church, and then this would happen to them at the church gate? What religion or law, whatever it is, would approve what happened [at Saints Church]?”

That is a question all civilized nations should grapple with as the persecution of faithful Christians intensifies the world over.