

ISIS Threatens 'Rivers of Blood' for Coptic Christians

As bombings and other attacks continue against Christians in Iraq, Christians in Egypt have gathered to pray and plan for their own safety.

When a group of Islamic extremists on Oct. 31 burst into Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad during evening mass and began spraying the sanctuary with gunfire, the militant organization that took responsibility said Christians in Egypt also would be targeted if its demands were not met. Taking more than 100 congregants hostage, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) called a television station and stated that the assault came in response to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt allegedly holding two Coptic women against their will who, the ISI and some others believe, converted to Islam.

The group issued a 48-hour deadline for the release of the women, and when the deadline passed it issued a statement that, "All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers are legitimate targets for the muhajedeen [Muslim fighters] wherever they can reach them." The statement later added ominously, "We will open upon them the doors of destruction and rivers of blood."

In the attack and rescue attempt that followed, 58 people were reportedly killed. A week and a half later, Islamic extremists killed four people in a series of coordinated attacks against Christians in Baghdad and its surrounding suburbs. The attackers launched mortar rounds and planted makeshift bombs outside Christian homes and one church. At least one attack was made against the family members of one of the victims of the original attack.

On Nov. 15, gunmen entered two Christian homes in Mosul and

killed two men in the house. The next day, a Christian and his 6-year-old daughter were killed in a car bombing. At the same time, another bomb exploded outside the home of a Christian, damaging the house but leaving the residents uninjured, according to CNN.

The threats against Christians caused a flurry of activity at churches in Egypt. A 35-year-old Protestant who declined to give her name said Christians in Cairo have unified in prayer meetings about the threats. An SMS text message was sent out through prayer networks asking people to meet, she said.

"I know people are praying now," she said. "We have times for our people to pray, so all of us are praying."

Security has increased at churches throughout Egypt. In Cairo, where the presence of white-uniformed security police is ubiquitous, the number of uniformed and plain-clothes officers has doubled at churches. High-ranking police officers shuffle from one house of worship to another monitoring subordinates and enforcing new security rules. At times, parking on the same side of the street as a church building, or even driving by one, has been forbidden.

On Nov. 8, leaders from the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox churches gathered to discuss how to improve security at churches. According to the leaders of several churches, the government asked pastors to cancel unessential large-scale public meetings. Pope Shenouda III canceled a celebration to commemorate the 39th anniversary of his installment as the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Guests at a recent outdoor Christmas bazaar and a subsequent festival at the All-Saints Cathedral in Zamalek were greeted with pat-downs, metal detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs.

Some church leaders, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the security improvements are haphazard, while others say they are genuine efforts to ensure the safety of Christians.

Most Christians in Cairo avoided answering any questions about the attacks in Iraq or the threats made against Christians in Egypt. But Deliah el-Sowkary, a Coptic Orthodox woman in her 20s, said she hoped no attacks would happen in her country. Noting the security present at all churches, still she said she is not that worried.

"I think it's different in Egypt than in Baghdad, it's more safe here," El-Sowkary said.

Almost a week after the bombings, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak issued a statement through the state-run MENA news agency that the Copts would be protected from attacks.

"The president affirmed his extensive solicitude for the protection of the nation's sons, Muslims and Copts, from the forces of terrorism and extremism," the agency stated.

Pressure Cooker

The security concerns came against a backdrop of heightened tensions between the Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority over the past few months, with weeks of protests against Christians in general and against Shenouda specifically. The protests, held mostly in Alexandria, ended two weeks ago.

The tension started after the wife of a Coptic bishop, Camilia Zakher, disappeared in July. According to government sources and published media reports, Zakher left her home after a heated argument with her husband. But Coptic protestors, who started gathering to protest at churches after Zakher disappeared, claimed she had been kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam.

Soon after, Egypt's State Security Intelligence (SSI) officers found her at the home of a friend. Despite stating she had left of her own free will, authorities brought Zakher back to her husband. Since then, Zakher has been in seclusion. It is

unclear where she is or if she remains there of her own free will.

Unconfirmed rumors began spreading that Zakher had converted to Islam and was being held against her will to force her to return to Christianity. Protests outside mosques after Friday prayers became weekly events. Protestors produced a photo of unknown origin of a woman in Islamic covering whom they claimed was Zakher. In response, Coptic authorities released a video in which the bishop's wife stated that she wasn't a Muslim nor ever had been.

Another rumor began circulating that Zakher went to Al-Azhar University, one of the primary centers of Islamic learning in the world, to convert to Islam. But Al-Azhar, located in Cairo, released a statement that no such thing ever happened.

No independent media interviews of Zakher have taken place because, according to the Coptic Church, the SSI has ordered church officials not to allow public access to her. Along with their accusations about Zakher, protestors also claimed, without evidence, that a similar thing happened in 2004 to Wafa Constantine, also the wife of a Coptic Orthodox priest. Constantine was the second woman the ISI demanded the Copts "release." Like Zakher, her location is not public knowledge.

The month after the Zakher incident, Egyptian media reported in error that the SSI had seized a ship from Israel laden with explosives headed for the son of an official of the Coptic Orthodox church. The ship was later found to be carrying fireworks, but another set of Islamic leaders, led in part by Nabih Al-Wahsh, an attorney famous for filing lawsuits designed to damage the church, declared without any evidence that Copts were allied with the Israelis and stockpiling weapons in the basements of their churches with plans to overthrow the Muslim majority.

The claims were echoed on Al-Jazeera by Dr. Muhammad Salim Al-

Awa, the former secretary-general of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and in a statement issued by the Front of Religious Scholars, a group of academics affiliated with Al-Azhar University.

There was no time for tensions to cool after Al-Awa and the others leveled their allegations. The next month, Bishop Anba Bishoy, the secretary of the Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, told the Egyptian newspaper Al-Masri Al-Yawm that Muslims were “guests” in Egypt, inflaming a Muslim population already up in arms.

“The Copts are the root of the land,” the bishop said. “We love the guests who came and settled in our land, and regard them as brothers, but they want to control even our churches? I reject anything that harms the Muslims, but as Christians we will do everything, even die as martyrs, if someone tries to harm our Christian mission.”

Around the same time, the Front of Religious Scholars called for a complete boycott of Christians in Egypt. The group called Christians “immoral,” labeled them “terrorists” and said Muslims should not patronize their businesses or even say “hello” to them.

The statement by the scholars was followed by a media leak about a lecture Bishoy was scheduled to give at a conference for Orthodox clergy. In his presentation, Bishoy planned on questioning the authorship of a verse in the Quran that calls Christians “blasphemers.” Muslims believe that an angel revealed the Quran to Muhammad, Islam’s prophet, who transmitted it word-by-word to his followers. Bishoy contended there was a possibility the verse in question was added later.

The mosque protests became even more virulent, and the conference was abruptly cancelled. Bishoy was forced to issue an apology, saying he never meant to cast doubt on Islam and

called Muslims “partners” with the Copts in Egypt. Shenouda also issued an apology on national television. By comparison, an Islamic publishing house that rewrote and then issued what it termed the “true Bible” caused barely a stir.

Al-Awa then blamed the deteriorating state of Muslim-Christian relations on Shenouda and Bishoy. He accused the Coptic Orthodox Church of exploiting the government’s “weak stance” toward it and “incarcerating anyone [who] is not to its liking.”

The Al-Azhar Academy of Islamic Research issued a statement that declared, “Egypt is a Muslim state.” The statement further went on to read that the Christians’ rights were contingent on their acceptance of the “Islamic identity” of Egypt. The statement was endorsed by Ali Gum’a, the mufti of Egypt.

The statement also referenced an agreement made between Muhammad and a community of Egyptian Christians in the seventh century as the guiding document on how Christians should be governed in a Muslim-dominated state. If ever codified into Egyptian law as many Muslims in Egypt desire, it would legally cement the status of Christians in the country as second-class citizens.

In 639, seven years after Muhammad died, Muslim armies rode across from Syria and Palestine and invaded Egypt, then controlled by the Byzantines. At first the Muslims, then a new but well-armed minority within Egypt, treated the conquered Christians relatively well by seventh century standards. But within a generation, they began the Islamization of the country, demanding all official business be conducted in Arabic, the language of the Quran, and Coptic and Jewish residents were forced to pay special taxes and obey rules designed to reaffirm their second-class status.

In the centuries since then, the treatment of Christians in

Egypt has ebbed and flowed depending on the whim of those in power. After the coup of 1952, in which a group of men known as the Free Officers' Movement took power from a European-backed monarch, Copts have seen their treatment decline.

In 1971, then-President Anwar Sadat introduced a new constitution designating Islamic law as "a principle source of legislation" in Egypt. In 1980, the National Assembly made Islam the official religion of the state.

Estimates of the Coptic population range from 7 to 12 percent of Egypt's 84 million people. They are accepted by some in Egypt and openly discriminated against by others. Violent attacks against Christians—which the government does little to prevent—accentuate tensions.

The state also routinely harasses converts to Christianity from Islam. Many have to live in some sort of hiding.

The Protestant woman said she was not sure whether attacks would happen in response to the threats, but whatever happens, she said she expects that Christians in Egypt will continue to endure persecution.

"According to the Bible, we know this is going to happen," she said. "This is not new or novel for us. The Bible said that we will be persecuted. It is expected."