

Christian Families Flee for Their Lives as Islamic Neighbors Attack

When Islamic State militants began circulating names of Christians who must leave their Egyptian hometown of Arish or die, Munir Munir's father Adel, a civil servant, brought home a hit list that had his own name as number two.

The first person on the list, shopkeeper Wael Youssef, was killed on Jan. 30. The Munirs barricaded themselves inside their house "like rats in a hole," Munir Munir recalled last week.

Within a month, four more Christians in the town had been shot dead, one beheaded and another burned to death. After the seventh killing, the Munirs finally fled. Their father insisted on staying behind.

A shift in Islamic State's tactics from attacking soldiers and police to targeting Christian civilians has become a potential turning point in a country trying to halt a provincial insurgency from spiraling into wider sectarian bloodshed.

Islamic State's branch in Egypt, which has waged a low-level conflict for years by attacking security forces mostly in the Munirs' native North Sinai province, has issued a new message inciting attacks on Christians across Egypt.

The militants' aim, say analysts, is to weaken President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi by sowing the kind of sectarian chaos that has fueled lengthy conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

During the killing wave of the past month, about 145 families have fled North Sinai to Ismailia, a city on the edge of the Suez Canal that forms the western boundary of Sinai, and about

30 to Cairo. Others have made their way to other provinces, church officials and human rights groups say.

Several families, including the Munirs, told Reuters that Muslim neighbors unaffiliated to Islamic State have stepped up assaults against them, emboldened by the militants and the violence that has destabilized their province and seen hundreds of soldiers and police killed in recent years.

"Our neighbors took our land because we are Christian. They tried to attack me and my sister and when my father came to defend us they sprayed his face with acid," said Munir Munir's sister Dimiana as she huddled with four family members in a churchyard, waiting for volunteers to find them a new home.

The families gathered forlornly at Ismailia's Evangelical Church around sacks overspilling with the clothes they managed to bring before they fled. Women wailed over lost homes, and children ran around, oblivious, as volunteers brought in blankets and made calls seeking to secure shelter.

Killed Just for Being Christians

Copts comprise about 10 percent of Egypt's 90 million people, the biggest Christian minority in the Middle East.

The violence is unlike previous waves of sectarian attacks in Egypt, because there is no longer any pretense of a reason, beyond killing Christians for their faith, said Ishak Ibrahim, researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

"What we are seeing here is new. There has always been violence against Christians, but it was usually for a 'reason' like land disputes. Now Christians are killed just for being Christians," he said.

"Militants are sending the government a message; saying they can change part of the country's demographics. This is a dangerous precedent," he said. " .. .And who knows if it will

be replicated in Upper Egypt or elsewhere.”

Sameh Kamel had just made it out of the North Sinai with his wife and two children when his neighbor phoned. Islamic State militants had come knocking on their door just an hour after the family had packed their bags and fled.

“They’re knocking on doors, and if they find a Christian, they kill him,” said Kamel.

The opening salvo came in December, when an Islamic State fighter bombed a church adjoining Cairo’s St Mark’s Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic papacy, killing 28 people. The militants threatened all Egyptian Christians in a video in February.

The flight of the North Sinai Coptic families poses a challenge for Sisi, who promised to restore security in a U.S. ally seen as a bulwark against extremism.

Sisi, whose ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi in 2013 sparked an escalation in the Sinai insurgency, has sought to assure Egyptians that security forces would preserve national unity. He ordered the government to help resettle displaced Christians and met with top officials to discuss how to respond.

The Interior Ministry said on Wednesday it “possessed all the capabilities, will and desire” to protect citizens. But those who fled do not believe the state is able to save them.

“The police and army cannot do anything; they cannot even protect themselves,” said Munir Munir.

“Of course we won’t go back to Arish. Go back to die?” {eoaf}