

Who Was Responsible for the Egypt Church Bombing?

At least 21 people were killed and scores were wounded on Saturday when a bomb outside a church in Alexandria, Egypt exploded as congregants were leaving a New Year's Eve Mass celebration.

The explosion ripped through the crowd shortly after midnight, killing instantly most of those who died, and leaving the entrance-way to the Church of the Two Saints, a Coptic Orthodox congregation, covered with blood and severed body parts.

The blast overturned at least one car, set several others on fire and shattered windows throughout the block on which the church is located.

Egyptian authorities reportedly said 20 of the victims have been identified. At least 90 other people were injured in the blast, 10 seriously. Among the injured were eight Muslims. Many of the injured received treatment at St. Mark's Hospital.

Burial services for some of the victims started Sunday (Jan. 2) in Alexandria, located in northern Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea.

Witnesses reportedly said a driver parked a car at the entrance of the church and then ran away seconds before it exploded. Government officials have claimed they found remnants of the bomb, filled with nails and other make-shift shrapnel, at the site; they suspect an unidentified suicide bomber, rather than a car bombing.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the attack comes two months after an Islamic group known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) issued a threat stating that, "All

Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers are legitimate targets for the muhajedeen [Muslim fighters] wherever they can reach them.”

Claiming they would open “rivers of blood” upon Christians, the group specifically threatened Egyptian Christians based on an unsubstantiated rumor that two Coptic women, both wives of Orthodox clergy, were being held against their will after converting to Islam. The statement came after ISI claimed responsibility for an attack on a Baghdad church during mass in which 58 people were killed.

The Egyptian government continues to suspect foreign elements mounted the Alexandria attack, but an unconfirmed report by The Associated Press, citing anonymous government sources, said an Egyptian Islamic group is being investigated.

Bishop Mouneer Anis, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, said in a written statement that he thinks the attack was linked to the Iraqi threats. He added that his church has taken greater security measures at its downtown Cairo location.

“We pray with all the people of Egypt, Christians and Muslims, [that they] would unite against this new wave of religious fanaticism and terrorism,” he said.

For weeks before the ISI issued its threat, Alexandria was the site of massive protests against the Orthodox Church and its spiritual leader, Pope Shenouda III. Immediately after Friday prayers, Muslims would stream out into the streets surrounding mosques, chant slogans against the church and demand the return of the two women. Before that, as early as June, clerics from at least one central Alexandria mosque could be heard broadcasting anti-Christian vitriol from minaret loudspeakers during prayers, instructing Muslims to separate themselves entirely from their Christian countrymen.

The Alexandria bombing comes almost a year after a shooting in

Nag Hammadi, Egypt left six Christians and one Muslim security guard dead. In the Jan. 6, 2010 attack, a group of men drove by St. John's Church, 455 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo, and sprayed with gunfire a crowd leaving a Coptic Christmas Eve service.

Three men were eventually charged with the shootings, but the case has yet to be resolved.

Egypt wasn't the only place in the Middle East plagued with anti-Christian violence over the holiday season.

The day before bombers struck the Alexandria church, an elderly Christian couple in Baghdad was killed when terrorists placed a bomb outside of their home, rang the doorbell and walked away, according to media and human rights reports. The bombing happened at the same time other Christian-owned homes and neighborhoods throughout Baghdad were being attacked.

Estimates of the number of people wounded in the attacks in Iraq range from nine to more than 13.