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Quick Thoughts: Paul Sedra on the IS Massacre of Egyptian Copts in Libya

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by Paul Sedra

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Among the most important points to make about these horrific murders relates to context. I would argue this event cannot and should not be placed within the context of domestic Egyptian politics or of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt. Without question, Egypt has a persistent problem with sectarianism and violence against Egypt's Coptic community. But these latest sectarian murders represent an effort by the Islamic State (IS) movement to advance its transnational agenda rather than an Egyptian one. Its reference to "conquering Rome" in the video of these murders—even though the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church has for centuries pursued a path entirely separate from that of the Catholic Church—underlines this key observation.

Indeed, the only reference in the IS propaganda that accompanied the murders that would resonate with Egyptians is the accusation that the Coptic community has sought to prevent Christian women from converting to Islam. And yet the most prominent alleged case, that of Wafaa Constantine, is over a decade old and has in recent years only rarely surfaced in Egyptian public discourse. For the IS movement to highlight this particular issue rather than other sectarian divides in Egypt that have widened since the 2011 uprising, further demonstrates it is not particularly in touch with current developments and merely seized upon the most sensational issue it could identify.

The above in no way mitigates the tremendous impact that these murders will have on domestic Egyptian politics and Coptic-Muslim relations in Egypt. They will in practice constitute a litmus test of the al-Sisi regime's commitment to Copts' security. Since the 2011 uprising and particularly during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's Copts have



[Still shot of the blood of victims mixing with the sea water from the video allegedly depicting the execution of twenty-one Copts at the hands of IS]

dwelt under a cloud of insecurity, uncertain about the extent to which the presence of new Islamist forces in Egyptian politics might impact upon their daily lives. It is for this reason that Pope Tawadros has developed a strong alliance with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – one most Copts support.

Since the 2011 uprising, Copts have often faced reproach from revolutionary forces for their support of the military and the current regime. What these critics do not seem to understand is that this backing has produced benefits for the Coptic Church and community that are nearly unprecedented in modern Egyptian history. These include serious consideration of eliminating existing requirements for presidential approval of all construction or renovation of Coptic churches. Similarly, for the first time in the history of the Egyptian republic the president last month attended Christmas mass at Cairo's Saint Mark's Cathedral, acknowledging the importance of Egypt's Coptic community in a way simply not seen before.

What is so tragic about these latest IS murders is that for Copts as well as Egyptians more generally, the measure of the current regime's commitment to Copts' security will be the severity of the military's response in Libya. The decision by IS to single out Copts among other Egyptian captives means the response will, in certain Egyptian circles, undoubtedly be judged in sectarian terms. And if that response fails to measure up to expectations, whether among Copts or among Egyptians generally, Copts will have a hard time feeling secure, even on their own soil.

Yet, the corollary to this makes for an important final point. The current moment represents a vital opportunity for a reinvigoration of the centrality of Egyptian citizenship shorn of sectarian identification. One of the great regrets I have had about the 2011 uprising was the apparent failure to deliver on the promise of new notions of Egyptian identity and thereby challenge anachronistic concepts of Egyptian nationalism. One hopes the current moment will present an opportunity for Copts and Muslims to join together, as they had in Tahrir Square in early 2011, to affirm the principle of equality and the bonds they hold in common as Egyptians.

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