

## Arab-West Report, January 5, 2014

Title: Security alerts as Christmas arrives in Egypt

Author: Yosra El Gendi

Since 2002, January 7th has been a national holiday in celebration of Coptic Christmas.<sup>1</sup> In past years it was a holiday observed by Copts alone, and not Muslims. The decision at the time assisted in strengthening national cohesion and bringing Muslim-Christian relations closer. Now, after more than ten years, security threats loom over Christian festivals. This is a direct result of the lack of security in the country, manifest in several terrorist attacks targeting military and civilian facilities. Adding to this tension is the culmination of a year beset with much incitement against Copts, particularly in the aftermath of ousting former president Muhammad Morsi (Mursī) from power and the security dispersals of the Rāba'ah al-'Adawiyah and Nahdah Squares sit-ins.<sup>2</sup>

### *The security situation*

Egypt is now witnessing almost daily attacks on civilian and military facilities. On Tuesday, December 24, a car bomb detonated in front of the Dakahlia Police station in Mansura governorate. The attack left 16 dead, hundreds injured and numerous public buildings, including the police station and the national theatre, in shambles. Ansār Bayt al-Maqdis, a Sinai-based terrorist group that was also responsible for the assassination attempt on Minister of Interior, General Muhammad Ibrāhīm, last September, claimed responsibility for the attack. The Muslim Brotherhood quickly distanced itself from the attack.<sup>3</sup>



[Dakahlia](#) Police Station Bombing

Source: *al-Masā'*

The interim government, however, responded to this attack on Wednesday, December 25, by declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group.<sup>4</sup> In addition to banning the Muslim Brotherhood, the government decided to freeze the assets of all civil society organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, amounting to 1,055 NGOs.<sup>5</sup> The decision to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, which was seen necessary due to the deteriorating security situation, was criticized by human legal experts as a political decision, with no judicial basis.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and Ansār Bayt al-Maqdis is still unproven, despite some media reports that state that members of the Muslim Brotherhood are among its leaders.<sup>7</sup> However, the government consistently blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for the attacks. Tāriq al-Mursī, Freedom and Justice Party spokesman, called the decision “legally flawed”. The Anti-Coup Alliance called the government’s moves “null” and called for further protests challenging the government’s decision.<sup>8</sup>

In light of these security emergencies, the Catholic Church in Mansura cancelled the Christmas mass<sup>9</sup> and intensive security measures were taken to protect Catholic Churches celebrating Christmas that day. Father Rafiq Greich, the spokesman of the Catholic Church, stated that there is coordination between the Church and the security forces. He added that they will be responsible for securing the area outside the churches, whereas the security of the church and the church's scout groups will secure it internally. He added that there will be explosives detectors at the doors of the churches.<sup>10</sup>

The following day, Thursday December 26, an explosive device, in a public transport bus transportation banner exploded, wounding five citizens,<sup>11</sup> while another was deactivated before it detonated. This was followed on Sunday with the attack on the Military Intelligence Headquarters in Sharqiyah governorate that injured four.<sup>12</sup> This was widely seen as a response by Muslim Brotherhood allies to the designation of the group as a terrorist group.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Calls for security measures***

Many Copts, as well as Muslims, have highlighted their security concerns and their fear of an attack on churches on the eve of Coptic Christmas.

Various Coptic activists have raised their concerns and requested the security forces to take appropriate measures to secure the churches during Christmas. Saï'd 'Abd al-Massih the head of the Egyptian Center for Human Rights and Development has submitted a memo to the Minister of Interior requesting him to form a security unit for protecting houses of worship.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Najib Jibra'il, the head of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organization, has requested from the ministers of interior and defense intensified security around churches, particularly in Upper Egypt. He added that various churches there have received threats. He also requested Muslims to go to the churches during Christmas to protect their Coptic brothers.<sup>15</sup>

This call for heightened security also came from the bishops and priests themselves. Bishop Ayub Yusuf, the caretaker of the Mar Girgis Church in Minya, stated that security does not protect the churches. He reminded that security failed to protect the Church after calls for help on August 14 when the church was attacked. Bishop Yu'nas Shawqi, bishop of Anba Abram Church in Dilja, also requested a law to protect churches be issued. He reminded that the threats to attack churches and the phrase, "Kill the Copts" are tagged on the church walls.<sup>16</sup> The churches also took their own security measures: the Evangelical Nile Synod has informed the Evangelical churches across the country that the New Year's Eve mass must end at 9pm and the churches must be closed at 10 in order to allow security forces to secure other vital facilities in the country.<sup>17</sup>

The Ministry of Interior has responded to these requests positively by announcing new security plans to secure the Christmas festivities this year. General Amin 'Iz-al-Din, the head of Alexandria security department, stated that they have moved all of the old vehicles parked in front of the churches, fearing that they may be used in terrorist attacks. General 'Ala' Abd al-

Zāhir, the head of the explosives department in Cairo, stated that they will use a number of police dogs and explosives detectors. He added that there are secret security agents around churches and agents securing the rooftops of nearby homes. Security sources stated that a total of 80,000 security personnel will be used to secure churches.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Pope Tawadros tried to calm the widespread fear.<sup>19</sup> He stated that he appreciates the efforts of the security to secure Christmas celebrations.

Some Egyptian media sources, however, remain skeptical. *Al-Watan* newspaper published a report based on anonymous security sources that there are high-level security reports linked to General Muhammad Ibrāhīm, Minister of Interior, that revealed that there is a plan by extremists to launch terrorist attacks and target Churches during Christmas, particularly in Upper Egypt. He added that there will be intensified security checks and presence in front of St. Mark's Cathedral.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, *Al-Akhabār* newspaper obtained information on possible terror attacks and published this in its issue on Monday, December 30. Also based on anonymous security sources, they reported on correspondences between the Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadist (terrorist) groups to orchestrate shocking events to punish Copts and Pope Tawadros for their supportive position of the road map on July 3, 2013.<sup>21</sup>

In response to these calls by Coptic activists and bishops, Muslim imams and preachers have called upon the citizens in Friday prayers to take to the streets on New Year's Eve and form popular committees to protect Copts and churches during their celebrations. Shaykh Ahmad al-Bahy, Imam of Siddī Jābir Mosque, for example, called upon the people to form popular committees after the threats by the terrorist groups.<sup>22</sup>

### ***To congratulate or not to congratulate?***

Yet another controversy that remains from past years until today is whether Muslims should congratulate Christians for their religious feasts. Interim President 'Adly Mansūr visited Pope Tawadros in St. Mark's Cathedral Sunday, January 5 to congratulate the Copts.<sup>23</sup> The official Islamic establishment was also quick to congratulate the Copts in what is seen as a sign as national unity. The Grand Mufti, Shawqī 'Allām, has congratulated Copts on the occasion of Christmas and expressed his wishes that religious feasts be an opportunity to spread the spirit of love and peace. He gave a short statement assuring the unity of the Egyptian people.<sup>24</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Alliance for Legitimacy also congratulated Copts for Christmas, but their statements held mixed messages in line with the current political situation. The Anti-Coup Pro-Legitimacy National Alliance made a statement which congratulated Egypt's Christians as they commemorate the birth of Christ. They announced that they will stop their demonstrations on the days of celebrations as to thwart the claims of the "putschists and certain collaborators (who) spread rumors about 'expected' violence to cause sectarian strife or to divide the community." They thus seized their opportunity to make a political statement.

The statement continued: "We offer our best wishes, despite the fact that Pope Tawadros II blessed the military *coup*, which saddened us as much as the Imam of Al-Azhar's position. We

offer our greetings, despite recent statements by (Coptic businessman) Naguib Sawiris inciting violence, because we know he does not represent Egypt's Christians. Indeed, God commanded us Muslims to show compassion and brotherly love for Christians.”<sup>25</sup> This statement gives double messages particularly as there is no evidence that Naguib Sawiris has called for violence, nor were any sources given for the statement.

However, in a different statement dated December 26 and drafted only in Arabic,<sup>26</sup> the Muslim Brotherhood referred to the closure of charity associations on the pretext that they are related to the Muslim Brotherhood. The explanation of this incident was that the Coptic Church is “trying to evangelize the poor Muslims” and referred to an alleged statement by Bishop Bola that the “Orthodox Church started giving assistance to the poor families that have suffered as a result of the decision to dismantle the associations”. The statement went on to ask, “Do political differences push for all such evil?” This statement was referred to by *al-Watan*, which highlighted that “The Muslim Brotherhood is congratulating the Copts in English but attacking the Church in Arabic”.<sup>27</sup>

Salafīs however, maintained their discourse with respect to congratulating Copts in Christmas. They continued to state that Muslims must ensure the pureness of their creed and that stated that Muslims should not adopt any signs of Christmas celebration.<sup>28</sup> Though their stance remains unchanged, it leaves a particular imprint on Egyptians in this year especially with the growing disagreements over creed and religion. It is likely for that reason that young voices within the Salafī Call, such as Nādir Bakār, 29, have taken a step away from the older generation of the Salafīs. He made a tweet on December 31 congratulating Egyptians on the advent of the New Year (see below). This gesture was seen by the Nūr Party’s older leadership as a mistake and the Nūr Party Facebook pages shared sermons of preachers prohibiting congratulating non-Muslims for religious festivals. News reports pointed out that this tweet caused tension within the Nūr Party and the Salafī Call.<sup>29</sup>



*Bakkār’s tweet reads: Finally, I pray God to make the new year a good year for all Egyptians and to protect our country from all harm and **fitnah** (strife).*

*Source: Twitter*

### ***Fear continues into the new year***

Egyptians received the new year with hesitance yet much hope that it may be better than 2013. Fear from possible terrorist attacks lingers in the air. In particular, Copts remember the attacks

on scores of their churches last August, still destroyed despite promises for reconstruction. They pray that the coming year will be a more peaceful year than the year that passed.

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<sup>1</sup> Nirmin Fawzy, "January 7, a national holiday in Egypt," *Arab West Report*, Week 51, Art. 7, July 26, 2008, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2002/week-51/7-january-7-national-holiday-egypt>.

<sup>2</sup> Author not mentioned, "Fi Zil Mawgah al-l'tida'at 'alá aqbāt wa kanā'is [A Wave of Attacks on Copts and Churches]," *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*, July 10, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://eipr.org/pressrelease/2013/07/10/1758>.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Kingsley, "Egypt police HQ explosion: spokesman blames Muslim Brotherhood," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/24/egyptian-police-headquarters-explosion>.

<sup>4</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "Egypt government declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group'," *Ahram Online*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/90037.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Abou Bakr, "NGOs reel from frozen assets," *Daily News Egypt*, December 25, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2013/12/25/ngos-reel-from-frozen-assets/>.

<sup>6</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "Egypt government declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group'," *Ahram Online*.

<sup>7</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "l'tirāfāt nagl qiyādī ikhwānī ahad a'dā' bayt al- Maqdis [The confessions of a Muslim Brotherhood Leader, One of the Members of Supporters of Jerusalem Group]," *al-Mugaz*, January 2, 2014, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://almogaz.com/news/crime/2014/01/02/1266200>.

<sup>8</sup> Heba Saleh, "Cairo Bomb Blast Deepens Crisis in Egypt," *Financial Times*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/85f25ef6-6e25-11e3-8dff-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2p1VARKo0>.

<sup>9</sup> Haytham Radwān and Mustafa Hamdī, "Kāthūlik al- Mansura Yalghūn Quddās 'īd al Mīlād [The Catholics of Mansura Cancel Christmas Mass]," *al-Shurūq*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-52/19-kthwlyk-lmnswr-ylgwn-qds-lyd>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Imād Khalīl et al, "Kanā'is al christmas fī himāyah al-jaysh wa al- shurtah al yawm [The Churches of Christmas is protected by the Army and Police]," *al- Masry al-Yawm*, December 24, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-52/7-knys-lkrysms-f-hmy-ljysh-wlshrt-lywm>.

<sup>11</sup> Author not mentioned, "Egypt bus explosion injures five, reports say," *The Guardian*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/26/egypt-bus-explosion-injured-fives>.

<sup>12</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "4 injured in blast near Egypt's Sharqiya Military Intelligence HQ," *Ahram Online*, December 29, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/90288.aspx>.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad al- Sabākhy, "Salāh 'Īsā: 'Unf al ikhwān rad fi'l mutawaqa' ba'd al l'lān anahum jamā'ah 'irhābiyah [Salāh 'Īsā: The Violence of the Muslim Brotherhood is an Expected Reaction after Group is Designated Terrorist]," *Al-Muhīt*, December 27, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://moheet.com/news/newdetails/751327/1/%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Amānī Mūsā, "Mutālabāt huqūqiyah lil dākhiliyah bihimāyat al- Kanā'is athnā' al- ihtifālāt [Human Right Demands to the Ministry of Interior to Protect Churches During Celebrations]," *al-Aqbāt Mutahidūn*, December 22, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-51/27-mtlbt-hqwqy-ldkhly-bhmy-lknys-tn-lhtftt>.

<sup>15</sup> Yasmīn Ramadān, "al- Aqbāt yastaqbilūn A'yād al- Mīlād bi Salāh hazīnah 'ala kanā'ishum al Muhtariqah [Copts Receive Christmas with Sad Prayers for their Burnt Churches]," *al-Watan*, December 24, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-52/1-lqbt-ystqblwn-yd-lmyld-bsl-hzyn-l-knyshmlmhtq>.

<sup>16</sup> Māhir Abd al- Sabūr, "qasāwisah Dalgā yutalibūn al-amn bihimāyit al kanā'is qabl 25 yanāyir [Priests of Diljā Demand Security to Protect Churches before 25 January]," *al-Shurūq*, December 23, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-51/36-qsws-dlj-ytlbwn-lmn-bhmy-lknys-qbl-25-ynyr>.

<sup>17</sup> Abd al- Wahhāb Sha'bān, "Wast takthīf a'mnī mushadad: Ihtifāl al kanā'is bi laylat rās al sanah hatā al- tāsi'ah masā'an [In the midst of Intensified Security: New Year Celebrations by the Churches End at 9pm]," *al-Wafd*, December 31, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-52/51-wst-tkthvf-mny-mshdd-htfl-lknys-blyl-rs-lsn-ht-lts-ms-fqt>.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmad 'Abd al-'Azim et al, "80 alf dābit wa muganad lita'mīn misr khilāl a'yād al mīlād [80 Thousand Security Officers and Personnel to Secure Egypt during Christmas]," *al-Watan*, December 31, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lsbw-52/55-80-lf-dbt-wmjnd-ltmyn-msr-khll-yd-lmyld>.

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- <sup>19</sup> Husayn al 'Umdah et al, "khutabā' al gum'ah: Ligān sha'biyah lita'mīn ihtifālāt al-aqbāt [Friday Sermons: Popular Committees to secure the Copts Celebrations]," *al-Watan*, December 28, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lbw-52/34-khtb-ljm-ljn-shby-ltmyn-htflit-lqbt>.
- <sup>20</sup> Khālīd Muhammad, "al Quwāt al Musalaha tatasalam ta'mīn al kana'is 'aqib tafgīrāt al Dakahliya [Armed Forces Start Securing Churches after the Dakahliya explosions]," *al-Watan*, December 25, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/379409>.
- <sup>21</sup> Jamāl Hussayn, Husnī Mīlād and Marco 'Ādil, "Kashf mukhatat ikhwānī listihdāf al kanā'is fi 'id al Mīlād [Revealing the Plans of the Muslim Brotherhood to Target Churches during Christmas]," *al-Akhhbār*, December 30, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lbw-52/44-kshf-mkhtt-khwny-lsthdh-lknys-fy-yd-lmyld>.
- <sup>22</sup> Husayn al 'Umdah et al, "khutabā' al gum'ah: Ligān sha'biyah lita'mīn ihtifālāt al-aqbāt [Friday Sermons: Popular Committees to secure the Copts Celebrations]," *al-Watan*.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Imād Khalīl, "Mansūr yuhan' al-aqbāt bu 'id al Mīlād [Mansūr Congratulates Copts for Christmas]" *al-Masry al-Yawm*, January 5, 2014, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/371151>.
- <sup>24</sup> Na'im Yūsuf, "Muftī al- Jumhuriyah yuhani' al masihiyīn ba'yād al Mīlād [The Grand Mufti Congratulates the Copts for Christmas]," *al-Aqbāt Mutahidun*, December 24, 2013, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.copts-united.com/Article.php?l=1759&A=129572>.
- <sup>25</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "Pro-Democracy Alliance Offers Best Wishes to Egypt's Christians for Christmas, New Year" *Ikhwanweb*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=31481&ref=search.php>.
- <sup>26</sup> Author Not Mentioned, "Bayān min al- ikhwān al muslimīn hawl tagmīd amwāl 1055 jam'iyah khayriyah islāmiyah [A Statement from the Muslim Brotherhood on Freezing Assets of 1055 Islamic Charity Associations]," *Ikhwan Online*, December 26, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=172559&SecID=212>.
- <sup>27</sup> Muhammad al- Basalāsī, "al- Ikhwān yuhan'iun al- aqbāt bil-injlīziyah wa yuhagimūn al kānīsah bil 'arabiyah [The Muslim Brotherhood Congratulates the Copts in English and Attack the Church in Arabic]," *al-Watan*, December 28, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lbw-52/33-ikhwn-yhnywn-lqbt-bljlyzy-wyhjmw-lknys-blrby>.
- <sup>28</sup> Author not mentioned, "al- Christmas fī mīzān al sharī'ah [Christmas as Weighed by Sharī'ah]," *al-Fath*, December 27, 2013, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/ar/lsn-2013/lbw-52/28-lkrysms-fy-myzn-lshry>.
- <sup>29</sup> Sa'id Hijāzy, "azmah bil Nūr bisabab tahnī'at Bakkār lil a'qbāt b 'id al Mīlād [A Crisis in Nūr Party due to Bakkār Congratulations to Copts for Christmas]," *al-Watan*, January 3, 2014, accessed January 4, 2014, <http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/385649>.