

## Sectarianism and the Revolution

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 by [Paul Sedra](#)

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There is a great deal of discussion in media circles of the attacks on Coptic protesters that took place this past Sunday. Much of this discussion has framed the attacks as sectarian and, specifically, as anti-Christian. Indeed, the language used in the headlines of various op-ed pieces is extremely evocative, if not verging on the hyperbolic. The religion blog in the Canadian [National Post](#) has featured a "question and answer" discussion under the title "[Are Coptic Christians safe in the new Egypt?](#)" Steven Cook of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) ventured so far as to describe Sunday's events as "an anti-Christian pogrom" in a recent [blog post](#). The question becomes: Is such powerful language appropriate under the circumstances? Is the use of such language, in fact, responsible?



[Image from unknown archive]

There can be no dispute about the fact that Sunday's attack was an enormous tragedy, one that fell disproportionately upon the shoulders of Egypt's Coptic Christian community. The vast majority of those who were [injured and killed](#) in the attack were Coptic Christians headed to the Radio and Television Building in downtown Cairo, aiming to protest about a perceived lack of concern, on the part of Egypt's military rulers, about the continued harassment and discrimination that Copts face in contemporary Egypt. This concern about the harassment and discrimination with which Copts are burdened is legitimate, vitally important, and merits attention not simply from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but from all Egyptians. Since an Alexandria church was attacked on New Year's Day, resulting in the deaths of over twenty Copts, there has emerged a far greater consciousness within Egypt about the sectarian cultural climate in the country – a climate that has become dangerously polarized over the past several decades.

However, to my mind, it is precisely *because* of that dangerously polarized sectarian climate that we who write about Egypt need to take careful heed of how we characterize what is unfolding at the moment. And again, this is *not* to minimize the legitimate grievances of Copts or the need to bring attention to them. Indeed, [as I have written in the past](#), the period since the January 25 revolution has witnessed an unprecedented efflorescence of Coptic protest on Egyptian soil that is, to my mind, a wholly welcome development. There once existed a strange chasm among Coptic Christians, between those in the diaspora, who felt obliged to cast light on the harassment and discrimination they and their families had suffered in Egypt, and those living in Egypt, who felt constrained to toe the line of national unity endorsed by the Egyptian state and the Coptic Orthodox Church.

This past Sunday's protest was only the latest in a series of protests that has effectively broken the taboo on discussions of sectarianism in Egyptian society – and only the latest, I hasten to add, to be attended not only by Copts, but by Muslims concerned with poisoned inter-communal relations. I am hard-pressed to understand the concerns so frequently voiced in Egyptian media about these protests, as if ignoring the concerns of Copts or the question of sectarianism would magically deliver a solution to the problem. This is an issue that must be faced head-on and without resort to the tired old slogans of national unity. The Egypt of the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution is not the Egypt of the 1919 Revolution or the Egypt of the 1952 Revolution. To use the old slogans is tantamount to suggesting that the country has remained frozen in time since the time of Zaghlul or Nasser.

But to acknowledge Sunday's protest as rooted in sectarian concerns is a far cry from declaring Sunday's attacks as motivated by sectarianism – which is why, I would suggest, employing the language of 'pogroms' is inappropriate, if not irresponsible. Undoubtedly there were closed-minded thugs at work who conceived of their violence on Sunday as way

to rid Egypt of non-believers. Yet, surely the more important question to resolve is that of the motivations of those who allowed those thugs to attack protesters – or indeed, of those who allowed soldiers to attack protesters.

Which Egyptian can claim that she was not sickened by the sight of soldiers attacking Egyptian citizens engaged in peaceful protest on Cairo's streets? Only eight months ago the international media had made so much of the 'professionalism' of the Egyptian military – of the refusal of soldiers to take aim at the peaceful protesters on Tahrir Square and elsewhere. And now we were confronted with breathtakingly disturbing images of Egyptian soldiers deliberately running over fellow Egyptians with armored personnel carriers. I could not but recall March 9, when Tahrir was quite literally **overrun** by thugs working in collusion with the military. The attack appeared brutal enough on video, but of course, we would soon discover the far worse brutalities, the insults to human dignity, that happened behind the scenes: the transformation of a monument to human civilization, the Egyptian Museum, into a torture chamber; the merciless beating of peaceful protesters, like the singer **Ramy Essam**; and perhaps worst of all, the **imposition** of "virginity tests" on the women protesters.

We should regard those who lost their lives on Sunday as martyrs – but as martyrs for the revolution above all. Because the attack that led to their deaths was motivated not by a blind sectarianism, but by a wide-eyed disdain for protest. A disdain that has led the military to attack protesters – whether Copts, or workers, or women – repeatedly, and with abandon, since the fall of Mubarak.

The Egyptian revolution continues.

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*It is important to be careful about language in situations like this and particularly religious labels, but surely cynical manipulation of sectarianism is still sectarianism, and there probably aren't many sectarian conflicts where manipulation isn't a factor, including the original Russian pogroms.*

**Tom Griffin** wrote on October 12, 2011 at 12:30 AM



*Thank you Mr. Sedra,*

*This is a terrible attack but you are right to note that to quickly label such events as a targeted religious attack is problematic. In the media that the West gets any attack against Western forces is called 'terrorist,' which is a categorical problem. The misuse of language, whether by ignorance or purposed, creates more enmity, divides, and fails to move to points of understanding where acts of violence may really be coming from.*

*As a Christian myself it is natural to be concerned with fellow Christians. A big concern of the churches outside of the Arab world is the harassment of Christians there. This concern is justified, clearly, but is not helped or alleviated by us jumping to conclusions about Muslim targeting. Conclusions which are not grounded in the general tumult going on in a place like Egypt, which effects everybody, cannot be proper conclusions. The situation is volatile and there is a big concern for everybody and especially those on the margins (which is the Arab world is Christians, which is the Western world is Muslims), so in thinking through solutions and hoping for safety we cannot get to a point of saying, 'Christians would be safe is there was no Islam' which is a not uncommon sentiment among certain sectors here in the world.*

*I've been finding Noam Chomsky particularly insightful on matters of the use and misuse of language.*

*Thanks for your article. Alex*

**Alexander Holmes-Brown** wrote on October 12, 2011 at 12:41 AM



*I am Egyptian and Muslim and I am really upset that the concern of our focus now is whether or not that International Media is using a responsible tone regarding the recent events in Cairo. If the Army and Administration in Egypt are showing irresponsibility regarding their citizens I believe we should address that first before anything else.*

jo wrote on October 12, 2011 at 04:33 PM

If you prefer, email your comments to [info@jadaliyya.com](mailto:info@jadaliyya.com).

  
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