

U.S. should partner with Egypt to fight terror and protect Christians.

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sits with Egyptian President Fattah al-Sisi at the Presidential Palace in Cairo, Egypt, on May 18, 2016, before a bilateral meeting. (Photo: Courtesy of [U.S. Department of State/WikiCommons](#))

By Raphael Benaroya

Christians may have sung of “Heavenly Peace” to celebrate Christmas 2016, but the Middle East has continued to be a crucible and exporter of anti-Christian Islamist violence. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State (ISIS) has kidnapped and killed Christians, destroyed their churches and forced religious conversions. In recent months, Islamists have murdered Christians in Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, France and, most recently, Germany—with 12 dead in the Berlin Christmas market attack. In all, ISIS has claimed responsibility for over 30 attacks this year, across 16 countries on four continents.

After almost two years of efforts to contain radical Islam, Egypt, too, has suffered a resurgence of violent acts against Christians in 2016: the burning of Christian properties; a mob stabbing; the murder of a priest; and the suicide bombing of Cairo's main Coptic cathedral, which killed and maimed approximately 70 women and children.

Why focus on Egypt, when violence elsewhere is generating more viral news? Egypt is strategically, politically and culturally more aligned with U.S. interests and priorities than any nation in the Middle East, outside of Israel. Consider:

1. Geographically situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, Egypt controls vital sea and air routes, to which the U.S. enjoys strategic access.
2. Historically, Egypt has wielded great influence in the Arab world. It is the seat of the Arab League and has a vested interest in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Its commitment to peace includes, most notably, recognizing and finding common ground with Israel.
3. Egypt represents great untapped economic potential. In addition to its 90 million citizens—Egypt is the Arab world's most populous nation—it has connections with over 1 billion consumers through free trade agreements in Africa and Europe.
4. Egypt's government is a republic, with power shared and separated by executive, legislative and judicial branches.
5. Egypt's large and strong military—equipped primarily by the U.S.—is stable and supportive of the elected civilian government.
6. Compared to many other Arab countries, Egypt is a relative oasis of diversity and freedom. Women in Egypt, for example, can vote, pursue higher education, drive automobiles without restriction and dress as they please. Some 80 women serve in Egypt's Parliament, and women hold several important ministerial positions.
7. Egypt is committed, in both words and deeds, to defeat the radical Islamist forces aiming to exterminate Christians from Arab lands. Specifically, Egypt is fighting the Muslim Brotherhood and its surrogates. The Muslim Brotherhood is the cradle of pan-Islamism, projecting extremist ideology to the West as well as in the Arab world. It is ostensibly a political entity but has direct ties to terrorist offshoots, such as al-Jihad, which assassinated then-President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat; Hamas, which has persistently sowed violence against Israel; and the Ummah Party, which has torched Coptic churches and attacked Christians in Egypt.
8. Egypt has made unprecedented progress promoting religious tolerance and protecting its population of approximately 10 million Coptic Christians—by far the largest Christian community in the Arab world. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has rebuilt burned Christian churches, provided security guards to protect them, apologized for past government inaction, attended Coptic Christmas services—the first Egyptian leader ever to do so—and enacted the only law in any Arab country that protects the right of Christians to build churches.

Critics of Egypt say this church law does not go far enough, that it leaves proposals to build Christian churches vulnerable to interference by local Muslim majorities. This is a defensible point. The law is not perfect. But it reflects a working democratic process in a complex political and religious environment. Consider these points: Coptic Christian Church leaders praised the law as “historic” and “reconciliatory;” it passed Egypt's 596-member House of Representatives with a two-thirds majority; the legislature's 36 Christians—even those with some reservations about the law—voted in favor; and on the other side of the aisle, 11 members of the conservative Islamic Salafi Nour Party, infuriated by the law, boycotted the vote.

The law is clearly a compromise to bridge conflicting religious points of view, and it sends a strong, constructive message of religious tolerance that is unique in the Arab world. It should also be noted that, in pushing for this law and other actions to protect Christians and suppress radical Islamists, President Sisi has expended substantial political capital, both at home and abroad, and taken significant personal risks.

Rest assured, I am not an apologist for Egypt. Critics rightly point out that civil rights in the country still have a long way to go to meet the standards of Western democracies. But Egypt faces extraordinary challenges in balancing its national security with civil liberties, and it has taken encouraging steps in the past two years to shift that balance in a positive direction.

As Vice Chair of the U.S.-based Business Executives for National Security (BENS), I have visited Egypt several times and spoken with many Egyptians, both ordinary and influential—including President Sisi and his top ministers. These engagements have led me to consider how Egypt and the United States can best mutually support each other's security interests.

Former national security adviser Stephen Hadley once noted that “Egypt is even more strategically important now than in the past because...we don't have a lot of partners to help.” With Iraq fragmented, Turkey in turmoil, Iran open for business, Russia asserting itself in Syria, and Saudi Arabia exporting Wahhabism, Egypt has clearly joined Israel as a keystone of stability and progressiveness in the Middle East—and as a critical player in the global fight against radical Islam.

As Egypt has understood for many years—and the West now recognizes—to defeat terrorism and other forms of Islamist militancy, the ideology must be fought at its roots. President Sisi has called for a united Arab coalition to fight ISIS. His efforts to build bridges between Christians and Muslims have been consistent with that goal. Religious coexistence and the suppression of radical Islamist terror are essential to peace in the region—and around the globe.

“It is important to emphasize that ‘radical Islam’ is synonymous with global terrorism,” President Sisi said to me. “We are fighting not only for Egypt but for the humanity of the entire world.” I agree. President Sisi gets it!

So what can the U.S. do to support a stable Egypt and work together with the Sisi government against Islamist terrorism and in support of religious freedom?

First, the U.S. should help Egypt bolster its security beyond just strategic cooperation. That means, in part, passing legislation introduced by the House Judiciary Committee in February, 2016, which calls for the State Department to officially join other nations (including Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) in designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. That would give the U.S. more tools to restrict the mobility and financial resources of Muslim Brotherhood members, making it more difficult for them to exert political influence and spawn radical offshoots. (If the Muslim Brotherhood were to regain power in Egypt, the 10 million Christians there would almost certainly face an unprecedented backlash of violence and oppression.)

Second, the U.S. should support Egypt's economic health—which, of course, is tied to security. Egypt is under economic stress, with food shortages, inflation, high unemployment, foreign trade imbalance and disaffected youth. To emerge from this crisis, President Sisi has introduced a variety of stimulus initiatives and regulatory reforms, saying “we have to take tough decisions, tolerate these decisions, and be patient.” Egypt is striving to rebuild its infrastructure, develop its manufacturing and service sectors and revitalize

its crucial tourism industry, all at the same time. These efforts would be a tall order in the best of times. The U.S. can contribute by boosting economic aid to Egypt, backing its proposed reforms and encouraging American and international businesses to invest in the Egyptian market.

Third, with the political dynamics of the Middle East in flux, the U.S. should acknowledge Egypt's centrality in the Arab world and support its leadership in forming a moderate Arab coalition. This would help offset the risks posed by both state and non-state Islamist extremist actors in the Middle East. It would also counterbalance the inroads that Russia and Iran are attempting to make in the region. Such a coalition could even help bring the Palestinians and Israelis into direct negotiations again, increasing the chances for a mutually acceptable peace agreement.

To defeat the ideology of Islamist extremists, nations must fight together. Egypt understands the volatile dynamics of this battle as well as, or better than, any other nation. And it is uniquely situated—strategically, politically and culturally—to partner with both its neighbors and the West to thwart Islamist terrorism and protect Christians in the Arab world. Egypt's initiatives and leadership in this battle should therefore be recognized, and the U.S. and its allies should step up to provide Egypt with greater support and partnership.

When we celebrate Christmas 2017, let us have made the world a safer place, where radical Islamist acts of terror and persecution of Christians are on the wane—where we can sing of “Heavenly Peace” with renewed faith and optimism.

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