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Who killed the Egyptians on their feast day?

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A horrific massacre occurred in Naga Hammadi, where six Copts were shot dead as they were coming out of church at Coptic Christmas. Egyptian history shows that sectarian strife spreads during times of national frustration. Egypt's current repression, poverty and injustice push Egyptians toward sectarian hostility, just as they push them toward violence, crime and sexual harassment.

In 1923, when the Copts rejected sectarian privileges in the first Egyptian constitution, the country was fighting to set up a democratic state based on citizenship. There was a tolerant Egyptian reading of Islam, the foundations of which were laid by the reformist imam Mohamed Abduh. Egypt witnessed a true renaissance in all spheres of activity, such as education for women, theatre, cinema and literature. But since the end of the 1970s, Egypt has come to know another understanding of Islam – the extreme Wahhabi Salafist ideology that Egyptian jurists have called “the law of the Bedouin.”

Several factors contributed to the spread of the Wahhabi ideology, primarily the rise in oil prices after the 1973 Middle East war, which gave Salafist organizations unprecedented financial resources that they used to propagate their ideas in Egypt and the rest of the world. Then millions of Egyptians moved to work in the Persian Gulf states and came back steeped in Wahhabi ideas. This ideology also spread under the proven sponsorship of Egyptian political security agencies, which always treated the Salafist sheiks with great tolerance – the opposite of the severe repression the government applies against the Muslim Brotherhood. Wahhabi Salafism helps support despotic government, because it urges Muslims to obey the ruler and forbids rebellion against him as long as he remains Muslim.

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Wahhabi ideas convey a vision that is clearly hostile to civilization because, if they prevailed, art would be *haram* (forbidden) along with music, singing, cinema, theatre and

literature. The Wahhabi ideology imposes on women seclusion behind the *burka*, which Egyptian women threw off a hundred years ago. It states clearly that democracy is *haram*, because it means government by the people while the Wahhabis want to apply God's law.

The gravest aspect of the Wahhabi Salafist ideology is that it completely undermines the concept of citizenship. In their eyes, the Copts are not citizens but *dhimmis* (protected non-Muslims) – a defeated and subordinate minority in a country conquered by Muslims. They are also seen as infidels and polytheists prone to hate Islam and to conspire against it. It is forbidden to celebrate their religious holidays or to help them build churches. In the view of the Wahhabis, Christians cannot govern or lead armies – implying they have no loyalty to the nation.

Anyone who follows the portrayal of Copts on dozens of satellite channels and Salafist websites is bound to be saddened. These forums, followed by millions of Egyptians daily, openly declare their hatred of Copts and contempt for them. Often, they call on Muslims to boycott them. As this enmity toward Copts spreads, is it not natural, even inevitable, that it should end in attacks on them?

The virus of extremism has spread from Muslims to Copts, generations of whom have grown up in isolation from Egyptian society, and some Copts are implicated in the same discourse of extremism and hatred. The church has undertaken to protect the Copts, but it has made them more isolated and has changed from being a spiritual authority into being a political party that negotiates in the name of the Coptic people.

Because of fear at the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the church has said it fully accepts the idea of President Hosni Mubarak's passing on the presidency to his son Gamal. This attitude, besides being incompatible with the great patriotic record of the church, does the greatest damage to the Copts because it implies they are working on behalf of the tyranny of the Egyptian regime against the rest of Egyptians.

Similarly, some diaspora Copts have apparently learned none of the lessons of history and have decided to throw all their weight behind foreign powers, which have always raised the slogan of protecting minorities as a pretext for their colonial ambitions. The diaspora Copts have demands, most of which are just, but unfortunately completely sectarian, in the sense that they want to solve the Copts' problems in isolation from the problems of the nation. The diaspora Copts are doing the opposite of what their illustrious ancestors did when they rejected proportional representation in 1923.

There's only one way to see the massacre at Naga Hammadi: Egyptian citizens were killed on a religious holiday as they were finishing their prayers. What killed them was a corrupt and despotic regime that subjugates Egyptians, plunders their wealth and drives them to despair, extremism and violence.

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