

## **Egypt mosque terror attack: 235 worshippers killed, 109 injured; Trump condemn 'barbaric act'**

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**Cairo:** Militants attacked a crowded mosque during Friday prayers in the Sinai Peninsula, setting off explosives, spraying worshippers with gunfire and killing at least 235 people in the deadliest ever attack by Islamic extremists in Egypt.

The attack targeted a mosque frequented by Sufis, members of Islam's mystical movement, in the north Sinai town of Bir al-Abd. Islamic militants, including the local affiliate of the Islamic State group, consider Sufis heretics because of their less literal interpretations of the faith.

US President Donald Trump condemned the devastating bomb and gun attack as "horrible and cowardly".

"The world cannot tolerate terrorism, we must defeat them militarily and discredit the extremist ideology that forms the basis of their existence!" he said on Twitter.

The startling bloodshed, which also wounded at least 109, was the latest sign of how more than three years of fighting in Sinai has been unable to crush an insurgency waged by the IS affiliate. Seeking to spread the violence, the militants the past year have carried out deadly bombings on churches in the capital, Cairo, and other cities, killing dozens of Christians. The affiliate also is believed to have been behind the 2016 downing of a Russian passenger jet that killed 226 people.

But this was the first major militant attack on a Muslim mosque, and it eclipsed any past attacks of its kind, even dating back to a previous Islamic militant insurgency in the 1990s.

The militants opened fire from four off-road vehicles on the hundreds of worshippers attending the sermon in the mosque. They also blocked off escape routes from the area by blowing up cars and leaving the burning wrecks blocking the roads, three police officers on the scene said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press.

Dozens of bloodied bodies wrapped up in sheets were laid across the mosque floor, according to images circulating on social media. Relatives queuing up outside the hospital as ambulances raced back and forth. The state news agency MENA put the death toll at 235.

Resident Ashraf el-Hefny said many of the victims were workers at a nearby salt factory who had come for Friday services at the mosque.

Local people brought the wounded to hospital on their own cars and trucks, he said by telephone.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. But IS has targeted Sufis several times in the area in the past, notably beheading a leading Sufi religious figure, the blind sheikh Suleiman Abu Heraz, last year and posting photos of

the killing online.

Egypt's presidency declared a three-day mourning period, as President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi convened a high-level meeting of security officials.

In a statement afterward, el-Sissi said the attack "will not go unpunished" and that Egypt will persevere with its war on terrorism.

The suffering of the victims was not in vain, he added, and will only "add to our insistence" to combat extremists. Addressing the nation later on television, he repeated his view that Egypt fighting a battle against militancy on behalf of the rest of the world.

Cairo's international airport boosted security following the attack, with more forces patrolling passenger halls, conducting searches and manning checkpoints at airport approaches.

State condolences poured in for Egypt, including messages from Israel, the United Arab Emirates, the U.S., Russia, France and Britain condemning the violence.

President Donald Trump denounced what he called a "horrible and cowardly terrorist attack on innocent and defenseless worshippers in Egypt."

"The world cannot tolerate terrorism," he said on Twitter, "we must defeat them militarily and discredit the extremist ideology that forms the basis of their existence!"

Islamic militants stepped up their campaign of violence in northern Sinai after the military ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013.

The result has been a long, grinding conflict centered on el-Arish and nearby villages and desert mountains. The militants have been unable to control territory, but the military and security forces have also been unable to bring security, as the extremists continuously carry out attacks.

Largely the attacks have focused on military and police, killing hundreds, although exact numbers are unclear as journalists and independent investigators are banned from the area. But the militants have also assassinated individuals the group considers spies for the government or religious heretics.

Egypt has also faced attacks by militants in its Western Desert, including an attack last month that killed 16 police, according to an official tally issued by the Interior Ministry. Security officials have told journalists that dozens more, including high-ranking counterterrorism officers, perished in the Oct. 20 attack some 135 kilometers (84 miles) southwest of the capital, Cairo.

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