



Egypt's New President Blasts Islamic Extremists

By Todd Beamon

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In a bold yet little-reported speech, The President of Egypt has directly confronted Islamic leaders in his country and challenged them to stand against extremism in their religion.

"We are in need of a religious revolution," President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi told imams on New Years Day at al-Azhar University in Cairo. The speech commemorated the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

"You, imams, are responsible before Allah," el-Sisi said. "The entire world ... is waiting for your next move ... because [the Islamic world] is being torn, it is being destroyed, it is being lost — and it is being lost by our own hands."

El-Sisi, 60, was elected President last June after staging a bloody coup as army leader that toppled his controversial predecessor Mohammed Morsi — the country's first elected leader and a member of the radical Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi, who like thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters is now in prison, came to power two years after U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in a popular uprising.

Since coming to power, el-Sisi has cracked down hard on Islamist extremists. Meanwhile he has signaled support to the country's beleaguered Coptic Christian community, attending Christmas services at Cairo's Abbasiya Cathedral and declaring that Egyptians should not view each other as Christians or Muslims but as Egyptians.

In his New Year's Day speech, el-Sisi told the Islamic leaders that they must lead a re-thinking of how their religion is interpreted and eliminate such extremism.

"We have to think hard about what we are facing," he said. "It's inconceivable that the thinking that we hold most sacred should cause the entire [Islamic world] to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing and destruction for the rest of the world. Impossible!"

"Is it possible that 1.6 billion people [Muslims] should want to kill the rest of the world's inhabitants — that is 7 billion — so that they themselves may live? Impossible!"

"You cannot feel it if you remain trapped within this mindset," el-Sisi said. "You need to step outside of yourselves to be able to observe it and reflect on it from a more enlightened perspective."

While the president's speech was not widely covered by large news organizations, many observers praised el-Sisi for his courage and candor. They recalled that one of his predecessors Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Islamic extremists in 1981 for making peace with Israel.

"One must appreciate how refreshing it is for a top political leader in the heart of the Islamic world to make such candid admissions that his Western counterparts dare not even think let alone speak," Raymond Ibrahim, an author and expert on Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs, said in [The American Spectator](#).

"And bear in mind, el-Sisi has much to lose as opposed to Western politicians," he added. "Calls by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists that he is an apostate are sure to grow more aggressive now."

The speech was denounced by a broad spectrum of critics, including many of el-Sisi's Islamist political opponents who have wide religious followings — charging that he was trying to corrupt Islam.

Even those who would normally promote a more modern interpretation of the religion frowned on el-Sisi's comments. "A state-approved revolution," charged Amina Khairi, a columnist at the generally pro-state newspaper al-Watan.

Some state religious officials also pushed back against el-Sisi's use of the word "revolution" or the idea of dramatic change.

Noting how el-Sisi's speech was ignored by the major news outlets, Jonah Goldberg, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said in [USA Today](#): "This is a big deal. El-Sisi is doing exactly what Westerners have been crying out for since at least Sept. 11, 2001, if not before that."

"Whatever your own view of the man, and whether you think he's sincere, el-Sisi's efforts to combat Muslim extremism — militarily and rhetorically — deserve closer attention," Goldberg concluded.

However, Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, remained skeptical — cautioning in a Newsmax interview that el-Sisi was a "political military figure" who quashed any opposition

to his agenda. His government also controls the media and finances mosques.

"This is the guy who runs the country and throws people in jail who don't do what he says," observed Bandow, who has served under President Ronald Reagan as a special assistant. "This isn't like going to independent churches, some top spiritual leader ... in America, or going to local congregations and saying, rethink something."

He likened it to "the president of the United States going to state-funded churches — where he can cut off your money and throw you out of the job — and he says, 'I think you should talk differently.' Those are very different things.

"He might win acquiescence, but I don't think that he wins acceptance from the people listening," Bandow told Newsmax. "He doesn't have a lot of independent credibility among genuine, devout Muslims."

True fundamentalist Islamic leaders will have the greatest impact in any such effort, not a politician with el-Sisi's reputation, he said.

"The turning point has to come from spiritual leaders, who have been rather fundamentalist, standing up and saying: 'We're serious Muslims, but this is beyond the pale. Allah never intended this. This is an outrage.'

"That's the turning point," Bandow said. "I haven't seen that yet. I would love to see it. We need that. Islam needs it. I don't see how el-Sisi provides that." hardly good news."