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## Growing Cultural Inclusion, Working as “One Hand” in Egypt

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Egypt benefits from a strong historic national identity, pride in cultural diversity and institutional longevity. In line with these values, on 6 January, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi joined Coptic Pope Tawadros II at a Coptic Christmas celebration at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo for the third year in a row. During his visit, he spoke about the importance of diversity in Egyptian society, stating that differences between people should be respected. He also announced Egypt's plan to build what will be the country's largest church and mosque, which will stand together “side by side” in Cairo and will be constructed by 2018. The President stated that he had already donated 100,000 LE to the construction of this church and mosque at the new administrative capital, and urged all Egyptians to contribute as well. By directly engaging with Egypt's Coptic Christians, President El Sisi is reinforcing Egypt's legacy as an inclusive and tolerant nation unified by a unique and enduring cultural cohesion.

President El Sisi's historic address at St. Mark's follows the 31 December announcement from Egypt's Armed Forces Engineering Authority that restoration on the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul had been completed. The church, which sits adjacent to St. Mark's, was the scene of a tragic and deadly terrorist attack last month. Egypt's quick response in restoring the church allowed worshippers to return there in time for Christmas services.

This work comes on the heels of President El Sisi instructing the Armed Forces to restore and rebuild the 56 houses of worship damaged or destroyed by acts of terrorism by the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2013. The multi-phase effort, launched in 2014, has been completed and all houses of worship have been reopened.

These actions demonstrate Egypt's commitment to the Coptic community and defense of Egypt's unique cultural identity. This is reinforced not only by President El Sisi's own words, but by other religious leaders as well as American officials and experts.

### WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

#### Egyptian Leaders

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, attending Coptic Christmas celebrations:** “We are all one...Egypt will export goodness and light with all our help, we shall teach the region and the world love, peace, stability and security. Egypt will be great if we all deal [with each other] with honor, loyalty and peace...As I stand in one of God's houses, I pray for God to save you and save Egypt, and keep peace and stability in our country.” [1/6/2017]

**Sheikh Shawky Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, the Grand Mufti of Egypt:** “Attacking churches whether by demolition, bombing, killing those inside, or terrifying...secure people are prohibited in Islamic Sharia...[We must pursue unity against] terrorism that tries to instigate sectarianism and sedition among the two wings of Egypt – Muslims and Christians – in a bid to weaken the nation.” [12/11/2016]

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, during an interview with PBS' Charlie Rose:** “[Egyptians] are all equal. This is very important for you to know, Charlie, that there is no discrimination. Fellow Egyptians have the same rights and the same responsibilities. And one of their rights





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is that they shouldn't be defined by their religious faith. And very recently, there is a law that passed by the Parliament to regulate the building of houses of worship, of worship for all religious faiths in Egypt. A code, a law that was laid for over 150 years. But now, it has been passed by the Parliament for all fellow Egyptians." [09/20/2016]

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, sending Christmas greetings:** "Let us together evoke the memory of Jesus Christ's birth and the life of Virgin Mary, as they come to remind everyone once more of the values of love, mercy and forgiveness that should prevail in the world...Such memory reminds peoples of the world to come together within the frame of constructive cooperation and hard work for the sake of the welfare and development of humanity, in addition to the reinforcement of efforts seeking to make the world more peaceful, safe and stable, a place fitting for everyone, and standing as a live example for the values of coexistence of all religions, races and doctrines." [12/24/2015]

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, during a speech at Al Azhar University:** "We must respect others and realize we are not on our own in this universe. We can never be on our own, because our Lord created this world for many nations, not just for one nation, for many religions, not for just one religion, and for many sects, not just for one sect...No one should define someone by their appearance or religion. We are all Egyptians." [12/24/2015]

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, at the Inauguration Ceremony of the New Suez Canal:** "The secret to the greatness of the Egyptian people and to their strength lies in the fact that they are united as one entity, standing together hand in hand. And so we see the Grand Imam and the Pope standing together to express the everlasting unity of the Egyptian people...This homeland demands from us pure intentions, diligence at work and adherence to principles and values – all of us, young and old, men and women, Muslims and Christians." [08/06/2015]

**President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, attending Coptic Christmas mass:** "We are setting an example from right here in Egypt. That is why it is not acceptable to say anything except that we are Egyptians. We must be Egyptians only. Yes, Egyptians. Yes, we are one hand...We will treat each other with respect. And we treat each other with love, a deep and sincere love." [6 January 2015]

**His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, on Coptic Christmas:** "We wish to thank Mr. President Abdel Fattah Sisi. It was a pleasant surprise and very generous and humane gesture from Mr. President. I am saying this, not in the name of Copts only, but on behalf of all Egyptians. Thank you, Mr. President, we truly feel that Egypt is beginning a new era with a renewed spirit. We will build Egypt together, we are all Egyptians and we are building the future of our country and the future of our children so that Egypt can occupy a proper position among the nations in the world." [7 January 2015]

