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Egypt strikes ISIL group in Libya after video of mass beheading

February 16,

Egyptian jets bombed Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) targets in Libya on Monday, a day after the release of a video showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians, drawing Cairo directly into the conflict across its border.

Libya's air force also participated in Monday's attack on Derna — an eastern coastal city seen as a base for ISIL fighters in the oil-rich nation.

While Cairo is believed to have provided clandestine support to a Libyan general fighting a rogue government in Tripoli, the mass killings pushed Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi into open action, expanding his battle against radical groups.

Cairo is also calling for international intervention in Libya against ISIL. Loyalists of the Syria- and Iraq-based group have risen to dominate several cities in the chaos-riven North African nation, just across the Mediterranean Sea from Italy.

After the release of the beheading video Sunday night, the tiny Christian-majority home village of more than half of the 21 Egyptians was gutted by grief. Inside the village church, relatives wept and shouted the names of the dead in shock.

"What will be a relief to me is to take a hold of his murderer, tear him apart, eat up his flesh and liver," said Bushra Fawzi in el-Aour village, as he wept over the loss of his 22-year-old son Shenouda. "I want his body back. If they dumped it in the sea, I want it back. If they set fire to it, I want its dust."

The 21 victims — mainly young men from impoverished families — had traveled to Libya for work and were kidnapped in two groups in December and January from the coastal city of Sirte. In the video, the group is marched onto what is purported to be a Libyan beach before masked figures with knives behead them. The killing of at least a dozen of them is clearly visible, though it is not clear from the video whether all 21 hostages were killed.

On Monday morning, an Egyptian armed forces spokesman announced the strikes over state radio, marking the first time Cairo has publicly acknowledged taking military action in neighboring Libya.

The statement said the warplanes targeted weapons caches and training camps before returning safely. Libya's air force commander, Saqr al-Joroushi, told Egyptian state TV that the air strikes were coordinated with the Libyan side and that they killed about 50 ISIL-linked fighters.

The strikes hit four positions in the eastern Libyan city of Derna, taken over by an ISIL affiliate last year, a Libyan security official told The Associated Press.

"The airstrikes hit their targets precisely, and the falcons of our air forces returned safely to their base," said an Egyptian military statement issued shortly after the strikes.

Still, two Libyan security officials said civilians, including three children and two women, were killed by the blasts. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Libya's air force said it had carried out its own strikes in Derna, without providing further details. It said the "intense strikes" were "to avenge the bloodshed and to seek retribution from the killers."

After the strikes, Sisi spoke with France's president and Italy's prime minister about the Libya situation. He sent his foreign minister, Sameh Shukri, to New York to hold consultations with United Nations officials and Security Council members ahead of a conference opening Wednesday in Washington.

"What is happening in Libya is a threat to international peace and security," said Sisi, who also banned all travel to Libya by Egyptian citizens.

Egypt's Foreign Ministry said the international community must adopt "immediate and effective" moves against such groups in Libya. "Leaving things in Libya as they are without decisive intervention to suppress these terror groups constitutes a clear danger to international peace and security," the statement said.

It also called on the U.S.-led coalition staging airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria to offer Egypt political and material support to counter the threat posed by the group's affiliates in Libya.