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Worshippers pray during Mass on New Year's Eve at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Cairo. (CNS photo/Mohamed Abd El Ghany, Reuters)

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**CAIRO** — A court in the Egyptian city of Alexandria began the trial Saturday of a man accused of [stabbing to death a Coptic Christian priest](#), an attack that shocked the Arab world's most populous country.

The case dates to early April when Arsanious Wadid, a 56-year-old priest, was killed at popular seaside promenade in the Mediterranean city.

Nehru Tawfiq appeared before judges at a packed courtroom Saturday in Alexandria, in the first session of his trial. He denied the accusations.

Defense lawyers, in their initial argument, said that the attack was not a "deliberate" one.

The court's top judge, Wahid Sabry, also questioned witnesses about the attack. One witness said the suspect stabbed the priest "because he was a Christian," and attempted to attack bystanders when they intervened.

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When judges asked the witness to recognize the suspect, he walked over to the defendants cage where the suspect was being held and identified him, according to a livestreaming on Facebook.

Prosecutors demanded the maximum punishment for the suspect, which could be a death sentence if he's convicted.

Sectarian violence is not uncommon in Egypt. Islamic extremists have also targeted Christians in recent years, especially following the 2013 military ouster of an elected but divisive Islamist president.

In September 2017, an alleged Islamic State supporter stabbed to death an 82-year-old Christian doctor in Cairo. He was sentenced to death the following year.

Egypt's Copts, the Middle East's largest Christian community, have repeatedly complained of discrimination. They account for about 10 percent of Egypt's over 103 million people.

At the end of the hourslong court session, judges decided to adjourn the trial until May 18, when prosecutors and defense lawyers will continue their arguments.