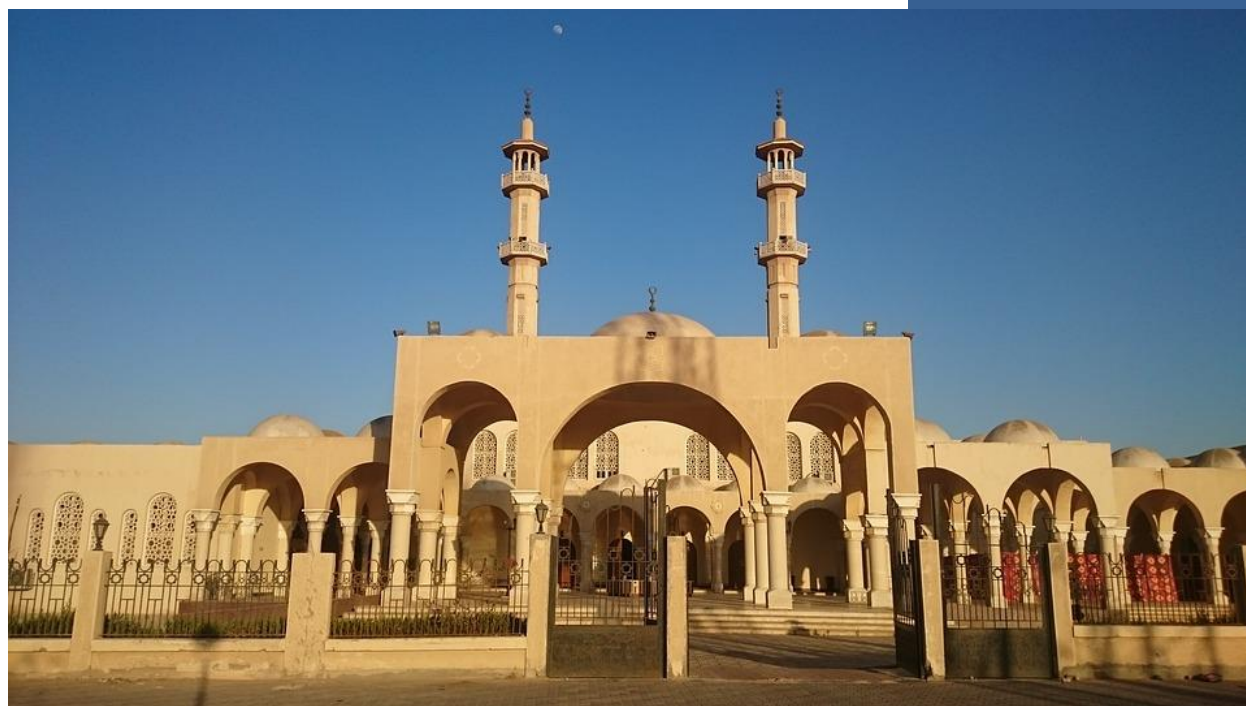


Religious Minorities in Egypt



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Note

This report has been translated and compiled in accordance with „Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (2008) and „EASO Country of Origin Information Report Methodology (2012). As a result, this report is based on some very carefully selected sources of public information. All sources used are references sources compiled from specialty reports and profile information and also press articles.

All information presented, concerning obvious facts, has been corroboratedly verified, excepting general aspects. Offered information have been studied, evaluated and carefully analyzed in a reasonable amount of time. Nonetheless, this document does not claim to be an exhaustive one, in order to treat completely the humanitarian issue in the country of origin.

If a certain event, person or organization is not included in this report, this fact doesn't bring the conclusion that the event did not take place or the person and the organization itself don't exist.

This document does not present conclusions in analyzing the merits of granting any form of protection, only partially contributing to forming the opinion of the decisive factor, along the other procedural aspects and taking into consideration the specific circumstances of each case.

Information and opinions expressed does not reflect the official position of the General Inspectorate for Immigration or of his partner in implementing the project AMIF/17.03.02–Management of COI Usage and Research Processes.

Romanian National Council for Refugees
Editorial committee

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Introduction

Destination Egypt, a transcontinental country situated in northeastern Africa and on the Sinai Peninsula in Western Asia (Middle East). The country has a coastline at the Mediterranean Sea in north, and the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea in east. It is bordered by Libya in west, the Palestinian territory (Gaza Strip) and Israel in north east, and Sudan in south. Egypt shares maritime borders with Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Modern Egypt became independent in 1922. From 1958 until 1961 Egypt was united with Syria as the United Arab Republic. The Arab Republic of Egypt (the official name) covers an area of 1 million km², this is almost twice the size of France or more than twice the size of the U.S. State of California. Due to its large desert regions, the country's population is concentrated along the alluvial plains of the Nile Valley and Delta and along its coasts, only about 3% of the territory is inhabited. Egypt has a population of approximately 92.4 million inhabitants (2017). The capital and largest city is Cairo. The spoken language is Modern Standard Arabic, the colloquial language is the Egyptian-Arabic dialect.¹

The 2014 Constitution introduced a number of provisions which guarantee equal opportunity for all citizens without discrimination (Art. 9); guarantee equality regardless of gender (Art. 11); and prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, colour, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason (Art. 53). The Constitution commits Egypt to respect all international human rights instruments to which it is a signatory.²

Retired Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was elected president in May 2014, almost a year after he removed his elected predecessor, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, from office in a coup. He had served as armed forces chief under Mr Morsi, and was a key figure in the interim government which took over after the ouster.³

Some Egyptians celebrated the possibility that Mr Sisi would bring stability to a country in upheaval since the removal of long-term leader Hosni Mubarak during the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Others worry that he represents a return to the authoritarian security state that prevailed under Mr Mubarak.⁴

Mr Sisi won a second four-year-term in March 2018 against a sole minor opposition candidate. Human rights lawyer Khalid Ali and former prime minister Ahmad Shafiq withdrew from the race, and the former armed forces chief of staff Sami Anan was arrested.⁵

¹ Nations Online, Egypt, 2017, available at <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/egypt.htm> [accessed on 6 May 2018]

² UK Home Office, Country Policy and Information Note – Egypt: Christians, 21 November 2016, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/583ee9844.html> [accessed on 10 May 2018]

³ Ibidem

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ BBC, Egypt Country Profile, 4 April 2018, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13313370> [accessed on 6 May 2018]

The general standard of living in Egypt remains rather low, and in relation to the size of its population, its economic resources are limited. Land remains its main source of natural wealth, but the amount of productive land is insufficient to support the population adequately. Increases in population have put pressure on resources, producing chronic underemployment, and many Egyptians have sought employment abroad. Political uncertainty in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising that toppled Pres. Ḥosnī Mubārak had a negative effect on most sectors of the economy, with the worst impacts being felt in tourism, construction, and manufacturing.⁶

The General Human Rights Situation

According to its constitution, Egypt is a republic governed by an elected president and unicameral legislature. Domestic and international observers concluded the 2014 presidential election was administered professionally and in line with the country's laws, while also expressing serious concerns that government limitations on association, assembly, and expression constrained broad political participation. Domestic and international observers also concluded that government authorities professionally administered parliamentary elections in 2015 in accordance with the country's laws, while also expressing concern about restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and expression and their negative effect on the political climate surrounding the elections.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

A three-month state of emergency (SOE), subsequently renewed for an additional three months, was imposed following the Palm Sunday terrorist attacks on Coptic churches in April 2017. Two days after the expiration of the second SOE in October, a three-month SOE was imposed. By law SOEs may only be renewed once.

The most significant human rights issues included arbitrary or unlawful killings by the government or its agents; major terrorist attacks; disappearances; torture; harsh or potentially life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; including the use of military courts to try civilians; political prisoners and detainees; unlawful interference in privacy; limits on freedom of expression, including criminal "defamation of religion" laws; restrictions on the press, internet, and academic freedom; and restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association, including government control over registration and financing of NGOs. LGBTI persons faced arrests, imprisonment, and degrading treatment. The government did not effectively respond to violence against women, and there were reports of child labor.

The government inconsistently punished or prosecuted officials who committed abuses, whether in the security services or elsewhere in government. In most cases the government did not

⁶ Enciclopedia Britannica, Egypt. Demographic trends, available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/Demographic-trends> [accessed on 10 May 2018]

comprehensively investigate human rights abuses, including most incidents of violence by security forces, contributing to an environment of impunity.

Attacks by terrorist organizations caused arbitrary and unlawful deprivation of life. Terrorist groups conducted deadly attacks on government, civilian, and security targets throughout the country, including places of worship and public transportation. Authorities investigated terrorist attacks.⁷

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government maintained its zero-tolerance policy towards dissent, introducing repressive legislation, notably a nongovernmental organization (NGO) law that may end independent associations, reinstating a state of emergency and continuing near-absolute impunity for abuses by security forces under the pretext of fighting "terrorism."

Security forces rounded up hundreds of dissidents, mainly targeting the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The Ministry of Interior's National Security Agency arbitrarily detained, disappeared, and tortured people. There were numerous incidents of what appeared to be extrajudicial killings, including of previously detained persons in staged "shoot-outs."

Authorities placed hundreds of people on terrorism lists and seized their assets for alleged terrorism links without due process.

The government imposed a media blackout on its counterterrorism operations in Northern Sinai. Wilayat Sinai, an affiliate of the extremist group Islamic State (ISIS) operating there, targeted civilians as well as security forces.

Military prosecutors continued to send hundreds of civilians to military trials in cases related to political dissent, whether violent or peaceful. President al-Sisi has approved in August 2016 a five-year extension of a 2014 law that expanded, to an unprecedented extent, grounds for trying civilians before military courts. Between October 2014 and September 2017, authorities sent at least 15,500 civilians to military courts including over 150 children.⁸

Egypt's human rights crisis continued unabated. The authorities used torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearance against hundreds of people, and dozens were extrajudicially executed with impunity. The crackdown on civil society escalated with NGO staff being subjected to additional interrogations, travel bans and asset freezes. Arbitrary arrests and detentions followed by grossly unfair trials of government critics, peaceful protesters, journalists and human rights defenders were routine. Mass unfair trials continued before civilian and military courts, with dozens sentenced to death. Women continued to be subjected to sexual and gender-based violence and were discriminated against in law and practice. The authorities

⁷ US Department of State, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2017 - Egypt, 20 April 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1430305.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

⁸ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2018 - Egypt, 18 January 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1422452.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

brought criminal charges for defamation of religion and “habitual debauchery” on the basis of people’s real or perceived sexual orientation.⁹

The Security Situation

The security situation in Egypt is unpredictable. There is a significant risk of terrorist attacks throughout the country. Attacks can be indiscriminate and occur with no warning, including in Cairo. While attacks in the North Sinai are frequent and mainly target security forces, terrorists have also targeted popular tourist destinations and other places frequented by foreigners throughout the country, including in Cairo.

There is a significant presence of armed security forces and police in most governorates throughout the country. A state of emergency is in effect. Curfews may be imposed on very short notice.

Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM), the most active terrorist group in Egypt, has pledged allegiance to Daesh. On September 21, 2014, Daesh released a statement threatening retaliation for the American-led coalition campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. The statement encouraged opportunistic and indiscriminate attacks against citizens and interests of countries supporting the coalition. Individuals and terrorist groups in the region may be inspired to carry out attacks in a show of solidarity with Daesh.

Western Desert: Borders with Sudan and Libya are porous, and bandits and armed groups are active in these areas. Attacks on security checkpoints and forces are expected to continue. Egyptian military and security personnel are also engaged in security operations in the area.

North Sinai Governorate: The security situation in North Sinai Governorate, particularly the areas bordering Israel and the Gaza Strip, is extremely unpredictable. Terrorist groups regularly carry out attacks against Egyptian security forces. (...) Road blockades by unsanctioned groups, kidnappings, robberies and carjackings by armed groups and terrorists occur.¹⁰

The government continued to effectively isolate North Sinai from the outside world, imposing a near-absolute media blackout and shutting down communications for weeks at a time. Extensive military operations encompassed more areas, including al-Arish, the capital of the governorate.

Between January and August 2017, 209 government forces and 430 armed group members were killed in Sinai, according to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, based on military statements that are hard to verify.

⁹ Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Egypt, 22 February 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1425021.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

¹⁰ Government of Canada, Egypt: Safety and security, last updated on 20 April 2018, available at <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/egypt> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

The fighting in Sinai has been marred by widespread government abuses including secret detentions, extrajudicial executions, and military trials of civilians. In April, a video confirmed to be authentic showed army officers and pro-army militia members executing at close range blindfolded detainees, later claiming the detainees were “terrorists” killed in “clashes.”¹¹

South Sinai Governorate: While attacks are significantly less frequent than in North Sinai, terrorists have carried out attacks in South Sinai, targeting both security forces and tourists.

Red Sea resorts and Upper Egypt: On January 8, 2016, attackers injured three foreigners at the Bella Vista Hotel in Hurghada. Although tourist sites continue to operate, the Upper Nile Valley between Beni Suef and Aswan has seen a greater incidence of strikes, road blockages and civil unrest than the coastal resorts. Sectarian, economic and family-related disputes have occurred and can quickly become violent. On June 10, 2015, Egyptian security personnel thwarted an attempted terrorist attack at the Karnak Temple Complex in Luxor.

Civil unrest: While the size and frequency of demonstrations have decreased, they can occur anywhere at any time without warning, but are held most often on Fridays following noon prayers. The situation remains fluid. There is always a potential for rapid escalation into violence where large groups of people are assembled. (...) There is a serious risk of sexual assault against women during demonstrations.

Crime: Egypt remains less consistently safe than it was before January 2011. Crimes such as pickpocketing, bag and purse snatching and home invasion have become more common. Kidnapping and carjacking may also occur outside North Sinai.

Women’s safety: Women, particularly foreigners, are frequently subject to unpleasant male attention, sexual harassment and verbal abuse.¹²

Religious Demography

The religions in Egypt are: Muslim (predominantly Sunni) - 90%, and Christian (majority Coptic Orthodox, other Christians include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Maronite, Orthodox, and Anglican) - 10% (2015 est.)¹³

The U.S. government estimates the population at 94.7 million (July 2016 estimate). Most media reports state that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2018 - Egypt, 18 January 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1422452.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

¹² Government of Canada, Egypt: Safety and security, last updated on 20 April 2018, available at <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/egypt> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

¹³ CIA, The World Factbook - Egypt, last updated on 1 May 2018, available at <https://www.cia.gov/Library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html> [accessed on 3 May 2018]

10 percent Christian (estimates range from 5 percent to 15 percent). Approximately 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders.

Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population and include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Greek, Latin, and Syrian), Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), Anglican/Episcopalian, and other Protestant churches, which range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. The Protestant community includes Presbyterians, Baptists, Brethren, Open Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). Jehovah's Witnesses account for 1,000-1,500 people, according to media estimates. Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria, according to religious and civil society groups.

Estimates regarding the number of Shia Muslims range from 800,000 to two million, according to media reports. There are also small groups of Quranist Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims.

According to an estimate by the Washington, D.C.-based media site *Al Monitor*, the number of atheists may be as high as four million, although other accounts place their number in the low thousands.

Accurate numbers for the Jewish community are difficult to determine, but it is believed to number approximately 23 persons, according to members of the community. There are between 2,000 and 3,000 adherents of the Bahai Faith, according to media estimates.

There are many foreign resident adherents of various religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. There is also a small Dawoodi (a branch of Ismaili Shia Islam) Bohra Community, numbering approximately 660, mostly comprising Indian nationals, according to a member of the community.¹⁴

The Legal Framework Regarding Freedom of Religion

- **Freedom of Belief**

While Article 2 of the 2014 constitution declares Islam to be the official religion of the state, Article 64 states that "freedom of belief is absolute."¹⁵

¹⁴ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

¹⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2018 - Egypt, January 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1426265.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and makes incitement to hate a crime. It describes freedom of belief as absolute; however, it limits the freedom to practice religious rituals and establish places of worship to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion and defines it as including “any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to ... religion, or belief.” The law stipulates imprisonment and/or a fine of no less than 30,000 EGP (\$1,700) and no more than 50,000 EGP (\$2,800) as penalties of discrimination. If the perpetrator is a public servant, the law states that the imprisonment should be no less than three months, and the fine no less than 50,000 EGP (\$2,800) and no more than 100,000 EGP (\$5,600).

The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), whose members are appointed by parliament, is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements pertaining to human rights. The council’s mandate includes investigating reports of alleged violations of religious freedom.

The constitution mandates the state to eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by parliament. By year’s end, the government had not yet established such a commission.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights but declared in a reservation that it became a party considering that the provisions of sharia do not conflict with the covenant.¹⁶

- **Officially Recognised Religious Groups**

Christian, Muslim, and Jewish denominations may request official recognition from the government, which gives a denomination the right to be governed by its canonical laws, practice religious rituals, establish houses of worship, and import religious literature. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) Religious Affairs Department. The department then determines whether the group poses a threat to national unity or social peace. As part of this determination, the department consults leading religious institutions, including the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar, the nation’s premier institution of Islamic education. The president then reviews and decides on the registration application.

¹⁶ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

The constitution states that Al-Azhar is “the main authority in theology and Islamic affairs.” The constitution stipulates that the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.

According to the penal code, using religion to promote extremist thought with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning or denigrating Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, and harming national unity carries penalties ranging from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment.

ID Cards: The law requires the government to specify religion on national identity cards, with the only options being Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. According to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order, the government may enter a “dash” in place of religion for Bahais.

Marriage and Family Law: The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims with documentation from a cleric.

In matters of family law, when spouses are members of the same religious denomination, courts apply that denomination’s canonical laws. In cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other a member of a different religion, both are Christians but adhere to different denominations, or the individuals are not clearly a part of a religious group, the courts apply sharia. In accordance with sharia, the law forbids adoptions for all. In matters of inheritance, the courts generally apply sharia unless a will instructs otherwise

Public School Curriculum: In public schools, Muslim students are required to take courses on “principles of Islam,” and Christian students are required to take courses on “principles of Christianity” in all grades. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other.

Religious Clothing: The Ministry of Education (MOE) bans wearing the hijab in primary schools, but allows it in middle and high schools upon written request from a girl’s parent. Cairo University, which falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, bans professors in certain fields from wearing the niqab during class.

Books: The prime minister has authority to stop the circulation of books that “denigrate religions.” Ministries may obtain court orders to ban or confiscate books and works of art. The cabinet may ban works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center of Al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and confiscate any publications dealing with the Quran and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*hadith*), and to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law.

Elections: According to the law, a minimum of 24 Christians must be elected out of the total 120 members elected as members of party lists in the first parliamentary elections after the constitution’s 2014 ratification.

Imams: The government appoints and monitors imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and pays their salaries. According to law, penalties for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) or Al-Azhar include a prison term of up to one year and/or a fine of up to 50,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (\$2,800). The penalty doubles for repeat offenders. Ministry of Awqaf inspectors also have judicial authority to arrest imams violating this law. A decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters (861 square feet), bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services (other prayer services are permitted), and pays bonuses to imams who deliver Friday sermons consistent with Ministry of Awqaf guidelines. Any imam who fails to follow the guidelines loses the bonus and can be subject to disciplinary measures, including potentially losing his preaching license. The ministry also issues prewritten sermons, but use of them by imams is voluntary.

Conversion: While neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit apostasy from Islam or efforts to proselytize Muslims, and the law states individuals may change their religion, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam for those born Muslim. The government does recognize conversion from Islam for individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam, according to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order. In those cases in which Muslims not born Muslim convert from Islam, their minor children, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, automatically remain classified as Muslims.

In keeping with sharia, non-Muslim men must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although Christian or Jewish women need not convert to marry Muslim men. A non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert. Under the law, a divorced mother is entitled to custody of a child until the age of 10 in the case of a son and until the age of 12 in the case of a daughter.¹⁷

- **Unrecognised or Prohibited Religious Groups**

The law does not recognize the Bahai Faith or its religious laws and bans Bahai institutions and community activities. Although the government lists “Christian” on the identity cards of Jehovah’s Witnesses, a presidential decree bans all Jehovah’s Witnesses’ activities. The law does not stipulate any penalties for banned religious groups or their members who engage in religious practices, but these groups are barred from rights granted to recognized groups, such as having their own houses of worship or other property, holding bank accounts, or importing religious literature.

Marriage and Family Law: Since the state does not recognize Bahai marriage, married Bahais are denied the legal rights of married couples of other religious beliefs, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse’s permanent residence.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibidem

¹⁸ Ibidem

Recognised Religious Groups

1. Muslims

Muslims: Government action

- **Shi'a Muslims in Egypt**

Shi'a Muslims in Egypt are a 'disfavoured' minority and have faced sustained hostility for their beliefs at both a popular and an institutional level. However, this is the result of modern politics, not primordial animosities. Sectarian tensions can be traced in large measure to the 1979 revolution in predominantly Shi'a Iran, with which Egypt cut diplomatic ties after signing a peace agreement with Israel and granting asylum to Iran's exiled Shah Reza Pahlavi. Viewed always – but not only – through the lens of regional geopolitics, the religious practices of Shi'a in Egypt have often been restricted and regarded by religious and government officials as an alien imposition, a threat to national stability and security.

This was evident in August and October 2007, when security personnel detained two Shi'a activists. They were held on charges of 'promoting extreme Shi'a beliefs with the intent of causing contempt of Islamic religion' and 'spreading false rumours' that 'could undermine trust in security agencies by claiming that prisoners and detainees died as a result of torture.' In 2009, around 300 Shi'a were imprisoned by state authorities without explanation. The 2009–10 annual report of the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) subsequently highlighted increased sectarian tension towards Shi'a.

Anti-Shi'a attitudes have remained strong in post-revolutionary Egypt. Ongoing tensions with Iran and the increasingly divisive conflict in Syria resulted in fears of a 'spread' of Shi'a beliefs, leading to an escalation of hate speech and rhetoric by prominent Sunni clerics and political figures. This culminated in violence in June 2013, when a mob led by Salafist sheikhs attacked a group of Shi'a privately celebrating a religious ceremony in the village of Abu Musallim, in Giza governorate. Though four men were killed, including a prominent Shi'a figure, Sheikh Hassan Shehata, and other Shi'a houses were also set on fire, the police allegedly failed to take action to halt the attacks. The incident reportedly followed weeks of violent rhetoric by Salafi preachers in local mosques.

Contrary to principles of religious freedom, and despite the Shi'a school of Islam being deemed a legitimate branch of Islam in 1959 by Al-Azhar, Egypt's current religious establishment considers Shi'a rituals to be in violation of the tenets of Islam. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, has used television appearances to implore his audience to beware of Shi'a proselytizers. Moreover, the Ministry of Religious Endowments runs mosques in Egypt in accordance with Sunni doctrine and does not recognize Shi'a mosques or rituals. In May 2015 a Shi'a dentist from Daqahlia governorate received a six-month prison sentence for contempt of religion after authorities found in his home books and other items supposedly used to perform

Shi'a religious rituals. A week later, Shi'a cleric Taher al-Hashimy was arrested following a raid on his apartment where books and other items were confiscated by security forces.

In a blasphemy case in October 2016, a Shi'a man in Kafr Shagr, Sharqiya was accused by other villagers of teaching children about Shi'a beliefs, convicted of insulting Islam, and sentenced to two years in prison. Later that month, following an annual pattern since 2011 and under the pretext of forestalling sectarian clashes, the Ministry of Endowments announced the closure of the al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo to prevent Ashura celebrations from taking place.¹⁹

*

On June 16, Grand Imam of Al Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb appeared on multiple television channels stating that all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence agreed that an apostate "should be pressed upon to recant...or be killed," and calling apostasy from Islam "high treason." He also presented evidence from Islamic doctrinal sources, however, to defend the view that ex-Muslims who posed no threat to society should be left alone.

Courts continued to apply the penal code to prosecute those charged with denigrating Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Government prosecutors investigated criminal complaints filed by private citizens on such charges, leading to prosecution of at least 13 individuals, including two convictions pending from 2015 and six convictions from cases in 2016. Citizens charged under the penal code included Muslim reformers, Christian children, a social media tweeter, an atheist, and a Salafi television preacher.

On January 26, Al-Khalifa Misdemeanor Court convicted writer Fatima Naoot in absentia and sentenced her to three years in prison and a fine of 20,000 EGP (\$1,100) for denigrating Islam by describing the Islamic ritual of sacrificing cows or sheep during Eid al-Adha as a "massacre," in a tweet on her personal account in December 2014. On November 24, the Sayeda Zeinab Appellate Misdemeanor Court affirmed Naoot's conviction of denigration of religion but reduced her sentence to a suspended six months' imprisonment.

On May 25, El-Gamaliya Misdemeanor court sentenced El-Sayed Youssef Ahmed El-Naggar to one year in prison and a fine of 1,000 EGP (\$55) for denigrating Islam after he burned a volume of *Al-Bukhari*, a ninth century compilation of sayings and deeds (*hadith*) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, in front of Al Azhar as a protest of such books for "espousing extremist thought," according to a local human rights organization. On September 21, El-Gamaliya Appellate Misdemeanor Court confirmed the sentence.

On May 28, First October 6 Misdemeanor Court acquitted Salafist television preacher Mohamed Hassan of denigrating Islam when he recounted a story from early Islamic sources that Khadija,

¹⁹Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Shi'a of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-of-egypt/> [accessed on 10 May 2018]

one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, had deliberately plied her father with wine and extracted his approval of the marriage when he was drunk.

In July the Court of Cassation (appellate court) rejected an appeal by Islam El-Beheiry of his one-year prison sentence for "defaming religious symbols." He received a presidential pardon in late November. Prosecutors had pressed charges against the TV host after a lawyer filed a complaint accusing him of denigrating Islam through his critique of Islamic texts with links to violence, including certain *hadith*, on his show *Ma'a Islam (With Islam)*. This case, based on the blasphemy law, was widely regarded in the press as undercutting President Sisi's ongoing calls for Islamic scholars to "renew religious discourse" and "combat the ideology of extremists."

Efforts to revise textbooks were ongoing, according to government and religious officials, in a response to President Sisi's continuing calls for Islamic scholars to renew religious discourse and challenge the ideology of extremists.

All 27 of Egypt's governors, appointed by the president, were Muslim.

Dar Al Ifta, the official government institute for issuing fatwas and Islamic legal research, issued a fatwa in June stating, "Openly violating the fast during Ramadan does not fall under personal freedom but, rather, is a kind of chaos and assault on the sanctity of Islam." According to *Mada Masr*, a news website, social media users regarded the statement as an attack on personal freedom, with some seeing it as potentially inciting violence against individuals who publicly eat during Ramadan. Despite the fatwa, restaurants remained open during Ramadan in parts of Cairo, and there were no reports of harassment of those eating during the day.

According to members of academia, no Christians served as presidents of the country's 25 public universities and few Christians occupied dean or vice dean positions in the public university system. Only Muslims could study at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution. The government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers, because the curriculum involved study of the Quran.

On October 11, after a Christian applicant to a postgraduate program at Cairo University complained that his rejection likely was due to his religion, Cairo University President Dr. Gaber Nassar issued an official directive to remove any indication of a student's religion on any application, certificate, or document issued by the university. A university investigation had determined that none of nine Christian applicants to the program in question had been accepted. Nassar subsequently ordered that the nine Christian students be accepted into the program and issued a directive to remove the question of religion from application forms. In December the Religious Committee of the House of Representatives rejected the university's directive, describing it as "unnecessary," and recommended that Nassar annul it. Nassar rejected the recommendation, stating that university application forms were not under the purview of parliament.

The Ministry of Education withdrew its appointment of Mervat Abo Sefein as Director of Beni Mazar Secondary Girls' School, Minya, after students chanted that they would not accept a Christian director, according to human rights organization Tahir Institute. The ministry then appointed Abo Sefein as Director of the Boys' Technical School of Beni Mazar but rescinded the appointment after students protested it. The ministry stated it had reversed the decision based on complaints from "earlier in Abo Sefein's career," according to media outlet *Youm7*.

Two public middle schools in Zaqaziq, Sharqia Governorate, designated the hijab as part of its mandatory uniform for female students. After complaints from parents, the Ministry of Education issued an administrative decision on October 23 prohibiting schools from mandating the hijab and referred the principal of one of the schools for internal investigation, according to the local woman's rights group New Women Foundation.²⁰

Muslims: Societal attitudes

Three armed men abducted Suleiman Abu Heraz, a renowned 98-year-old blind Sufi sheikh, from his home in North Sinai, accused him and another sheikh of sorcery, and beheaded both of them, according to press reports. In a November 19 statement, the ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility for the beheadings and published a video of the attack.

On November 5, the press reported that residents in Ezbet Talata village in Damietta Governorate filed a complaint about a teacher who had converted from Sunni to Shia Islam and whom they alleged was preaching the Shia faith to her students. Residents had learned about her conversion after she called in to a Shia satellite channel. The Ministry of Education subsequently transferred the teacher to another school in a different village. When her landlord in the new village learned that she was a Shia he evicted her, according to the mayor of Ezbet Talata. The teacher returned to Ezbet Talata but residents there ostracized her, the mayor told the press in a video interview.

In September during a television interview, lawyer and political commentator Nabih Al Wahsh physically attacked an Islamic scholar who had stated Islamic doctrine did not require a woman to cover her hair.

Public discussions continued among policy makers and in the media about universities, hospitals, and other service-oriented entities that adopted policies prohibiting professors, doctors, nurses, and others from wearing the *niqab* while at work. Banha University investigated a dean after he asked a female security officer to verify a student's identity in order to prevent cheating during a final exam, according to press reports. The student union issued a statement complaining that security officers had asked the student to lift her *niqab* in front of others. The statement stated that choosing to cover the face was "an act of personal freedom."

²⁰ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

Representatives of some Salafist groups, including the Coalition of Muslims in Defense of the Companions and the Prophet's Family, published negative remarks about Shia Muslims. On February 1, the group threatened to sue the minister of culture for "spreading Shia ideology" when the minister rejected their calls to confiscate Shia books exhibited at the Cairo International Book Fair.²¹

Militants detonated a bomb inside a crowded mosque in the Sinai Peninsula on Friday and then sprayed gunfire on panicked worshippers as they fled, killing at least 305 people and wounding at least 128 others. Officials called it the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history.

The scale and ruthlessness of the assault, in an area racked by an Islamist insurgency, sent shock waves across the nation — not just for the number of deaths but also for the choice of target. Attacks on mosques are rare in Egypt, where the Islamic State has targeted Coptic Christian churches and pilgrims but avoided Muslim places of worship.

The attack injected a new element into Egypt's struggle with militants because most of the victims were Sufi Muslims, who practice a mystical form of Islam that the Islamic State and other Sunni extremist groups deem heretical. And it underscored the failure of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has justified his harsh crackdown on political freedom in the name of crushing Islamic militancy, to deliver on his promises of security.²²

2. Christians

Christians: Government action

A continued crackdown by the Sisi regime on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other political opposition, involving arbitrary arrests, indefinite detention and killings, has alienated a significant portion of the population and, by extension, has put Copts and other religious minorities at increasing risk of attack.²³

The Copts are one of the most ancient Christian communities and the largest still left in the Middle East. But they have long felt vulnerable and marginalised. This sense of precariousness has only increased in recent years, with the rise of violent jihadism in parts of Egypt.²⁴

However, Copts have in some ways appeared to have benefited under Sisi. For example, Egypt's national elections in October 2015 saw Coptic Christians win 36 parliamentary seats, 6 per cent

²¹ Ibid.

²² The New York Times, Militants Kill 305 at Sufi Mosque in Egypt's Deadliest Terrorist Attack, 24 November 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/middleeast/mosque-attack-egypt.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

²³ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Copts of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/copts/> [accessed on 10 May 2018]

²⁴ BBC, Egypt's Coptic Churches hit by deadly blasts on Palm Sunday, 9 April 2017, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39544451> [accessed on 6 May 2018]

of the total – an unprecedented achievement. This has been accompanied by Sisi's apparent efforts to engage the Coptic church leadership, highlighted by his attendance of Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015 – the first time a head of state has done so. Sisi has repeated this gesture in the following years, and indeed since he led the overthrow of Morsi and later became President, Sisi and his government have received support from the Coptic Orthodox Church under Pope Tawadros II. Yet many Egyptian Copts hold opinions at odds with the church leadership, as evidenced by a joint statement issued in September 2016 by 800 prominent Coptic figures insisting the church's growing closeness with the regime has only hurt the community.

Despite symbolic gestures by the regime, Coptic Egyptians have faced discrimination by state institutions and ongoing risks of sectarian violence. One area where the state has failed in its protection of the community is the continued barriers to constructing houses of worship. Particularly in Upper Egypt, this has long contributed to the targeting of Coptic congregations and their religious practices.²⁵

In spite of numerous speeches by President Sisi underscoring that all Egyptians were equal citizens under the law, numerous religious freedom and human rights activists said that government officials, courts, and prosecutors sometimes did not extend procedural safeguards and rights of due process to members of minority faiths. For example, prison authorities at the local level delayed a court-ordered release of a noted convert from Islam to Christianity, according to international human rights groups and the press. According to sources in the Christian community, security and police officials sometimes failed to respond in a timely manner to attacks on Christians and their homes, businesses, and places of worship, especially in Upper Egypt. The government frequently failed to investigate or prosecute such attacks, relying instead on the controversial practice of "customary reconciliation" sessions whereby both sides in a dispute negotiated a settlement brokered by religious or other community leaders. Although there were reports that police rescued Christian victims of kidnappings, police action was not always prompt, activists said.

In July Mohamed Hegazy, known as Bishoy Armia Boulous after his conversion from Islam to Christianity, was released after spending over 18 months in detention, beyond the six-month legal limit for those charged with misdemeanors, pending investigation for "denigrating Islam." On June 26, a court ordered Boulous/Hegazy's release on bail. Authorities subsequently stated they had lost the court order, required him to produce additional documentation, and "transferred him from prison to prison across Egypt under the orders of the Ministry of the Interior" without informing his attorney, according to *Morning Star News*, a news service that reports on persecution of Christians. Ultimately, Boulous/Hegazy recorded a video testifying that he was reconvertng from Christianity to Islam and was released on bail on July 23. His legal case remained pending at year's end.

²⁵ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Copts of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/copts/> [accessed on 10 May 2018]

Local authorities frequently encouraged participation in “customary reconciliation” sessions to address incidents of sectarian violence, saying such sessions prevented further violence by quickly defusing tensions. According to the authorities, the intent was for the parties to agree on measures to stop the conflict, which might include punishment of the perpetrators by expulsion from the village, compensation for the affected parties, or a penalty clause for the future breaching of any agreement. Beginning in 2014, the Coptic Orthodox Church refused to participate in customary reconciliation as a substitute for the rule of law, only approving its use as an immediate measure to stop bloodshed and deescalate tensions. Human rights groups and members of the Coptic community said that such sessions regularly led to outcomes unfavorable to minority parties and effectively precluded recourse to the judicial system in most cases, as victims were regularly pressured to retract their statements and deny facts, leading to the dropping of charges. One human rights NGO said “customary reconciliation” constituted an encroachment on the judicial system and on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship.

On February 25, Bani Mazar Juvenile Misdemeanor Court sentenced four Christian males ages 16 to 17 to five years’ imprisonment for “denigrating Islam” after they appeared in a half-minute-long video clip in which they allegedly mocked Islamic prayer and made silly gestures. Villagers had discovered the video on a phone allegedly belonging to their teacher, Gad Youssef Younan, whom the same court had convicted in December 2015 for capturing the youths’ actions on video. According to international press reports, the youths fled the country.

By year’s end, the government had nearly completed rebuilding and restoring 78 churches and other Christian sites damaged or destroyed by mob violence after the 2013 forcible dispersal of Muslim Brotherhood-led sit-ins in Cairo and Giza, according to Christian leaders. President Sisi announced that two sites remained in need of painting, which was expected to be completed within two months. While still defense minister, Sisi had vowed to have the military rebuild the churches immediately after they were attacked in 2013. He apologized to attendants at the Christmas Eve service at St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Cathedral on January 6 that the government had not been able to complete rebuilding them in 2015 and promised to try to complete the work in 2016.

President Sisi approved the licenses of three new churches during the first eight months of the year, until the new law transferred this authority to governors.

After a string of violent sectarian incidents in Minya, the government replaced the governor and chief of security there as part of a larger reshuffle. According to press reports, Copts regarded the move as a positive step toward improving security in the region. When the new governor visited the Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Minya on his first day in office on September 9, the governor stated that Minya’s sectarian problems should be resolved by upholding the law, according to press reports. The bishop called for the rule of law, justice, and equality, and said the governor’s appointment “promised a new era of peace and security,” according to press reports. The Bishop of Minya repeated in several statements to the media that he would no longer agree to deal with sectarian incidents through customary reconciliation. According to a

study published July 27 in *Watani*, the country's Coptic-run weekly, 65 percent of violent attacks against Copts took place in Minya.

Children legally identified as Muslims but who self-identified as Christians and who lived in Christian homes were required to attend religion classes for Muslim students, as a matter of policy. In addition, such children could not be admitted to a Christian orphanage and had no recourse to choose their religion when they reached legal age.

Construction continued on a state-funded church in honor of 20 Egyptian Copts beheaded by an ISIS affiliate in Libya.²⁶

The authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of religion by discriminating against Christians. In August 2017, security forces prevented dozens of Coptic Christians from praying in a house in Alfor village in Minya governorate, citing reasons of security. There was continued impunity for sectarian attacks on Christian communities, and the authorities continued to rely on customary reconciliation and settlements agreed by local authorities and religious leaders. Amid this impunity, violence by non-state actors against Christians increased significantly. (...) ²⁷

Christians: Societal attitudes

Religious minorities and atheists have faced persecution and violence, with Copts in particular suffering numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction in recent years.²⁸

On December 11, 29 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack during Sunday liturgy in the women's section of Saints Peter and Paul Church, which is part of the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral complex in Cairo. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and vowed to further attack Christians in "a war against polytheism," referring to the Christian belief in the Trinity. The Ministry of Interior said it had arrested four people in connection with the bombing. The army repaired the damage in two weeks' time, following President Sisi's order for it to be completed in time for Coptic Orthodox Christmas on January 7.

On June 30, three armed men in a truck shot and killed Father Raphael Moussa, a priest at St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in al-Arish in North Sinai, according to press reports. The local ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility on social media the same day. The attack took place on the third anniversary of the mass protests calling on the army to oust former president Mohamed Morsi.

²⁶ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

²⁷ Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Egypt, 22 February 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1425021.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

²⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2018 - Egypt, January 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1426265.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

There were numerous reports of incidents of sectarian mob violence against Coptic Christians, including attacks resulting from Muslim opposition to the presence of churches in their communities. On July 17, assailants armed with bats and knives attacked the families of two Coptic priests in their homes in Tahna El-Gabal village in Minya, killing one family member and injuring three, including an elderly man, according to an official statement by the local Coptic Orthodox bishopric. Several news outlets reported that the attack was the result of a fight between the assailants and the priests' families; however, a Christian news outlet reported that a group of 100 villagers had attacked the victims in response to a rumor that the community was building a new church in the village. A human rights activist told *Mada Masr* news that the villagers were mobilized against the Christian family due to their religious identity.

On November 24, the press reported that a mob of Muslim residents in Al-Naghameesh village in Sohag Governorate burned a Christian-owned guesthouse that was being used for worship services. Christians had applied to have the building registered as a church, under the new law on licensing churches. Four Christians were injured in the attack, and the mob also looted three Christian-owned stores and damaged or destroyed 10 Christian-owned properties, consisting of nine homes and a garage. According to press reports, security and military forces used tear gas to disperse the mob. On November 26, prosecutors ordered the detention of 14 suspects pending investigations. The governor of Sohag promised to restore the guesthouse at governorate expense.

According to press reports, on May 20 in the village of El-Karm in Minya Province, approximately 300 Muslim villagers stripped naked an elderly Coptic Christian woman, Souad Thabet, and paraded her through the streets after a rumor spread that her son was having an affair with a married Muslim woman. The villagers also set fire to the woman's house, along with three other houses owned by Coptic Christians unrelated to the woman, looted two others, and injured two Christians. The fire spread to several neighboring houses. According to one witness, during the attacks the mob shouted slogans against Copts and called them infidels. Police did not arrive until more than an hour after the incidents, according to press reports. The Minya Bishopric stated that Thabet and her husband had filed a formal police complaint the day before the attacks about receiving threats, stating that they expected an attack the following day, but police had not responded. In the days following the incidents, police arrested 16 Muslim suspects and several Christians whom they accused of setting fire to the neighboring houses that had caught fire, three of which were owned by Muslims, according to press reports. Immediately after the attack, President Sisi announced that the perpetrators would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. By July 13, all suspects had been released on bail pending criminal investigations. On October 6, 25 suspects were referred to criminal court on charges of illegal assembly, arson, vandalism, and illegal possession of firearms.

On June 29, Muslims in Kom al-Loufi village in Minya Governorate attacked a Christian-owned home after rumors spread that he intended to use the new house he was building as a church. The assailants set fire to the home and to three other homes owned by the Christian resident's brothers. Two days earlier, security officers had forced construction workers to stop work at the

house, reportedly due to tensions between Christians and Muslims in the community. Following the attack, police arrested 19 suspects on charges of “creating chaos,” arson, and resisting authorities. All were released on bail within a month. An MP told the press that victims had received death threats if they did not agree to customary reconciliation and withdraw their complaints. The victims refused, insisting that the perpetrators be prosecuted in court.

On July 9, a journalist for the newspaper *Watani* specializing in coverage of sectarian violence incidents reported the victims in Kom al-Loufi were living under poor conditions, “almost locked up, in fear of leaving their temporary residence, due to the threats they were receiving.” He quoted a threat by one of the village elders against the victims: “Not a single Copt will live in the village, if the police complaints are not withdrawn.” The Minya Governorate disbursed compensation to the victims, but the funds covered only a fraction of the costs of repair, according to press reports. The case remained pending at year’s end. The village continued without a church; a request to build one had remained pending for 10 years.

On July 22, several dozen residents returning from Friday prayers attacked the homes of Christians, throwing rocks and glass, in Saft Al Kharsa village in the Governorate of Beni Suef. According to media outlet *Youm7* and videos of the attack on Youtube, the attack was incited by a rumor that a Christian resident intended to transform the second floor of his house into a church. Police arrested 18 Muslims for the violence, as well as eight Christians, following the attack. According to press reports, the Muslim suspects were detained pending investigation on charges of inciting violence, rioting, and attacking the houses and property of Christians, but released after several weeks. Christian news outlet *Watani* reported that eight Christians were also held without charge for varying periods, with some for up to one month. Two were released after 18 days of detention and three after 29 days on August 19, while the remaining three were released a few days after that.

Numerous press outlets reported arson attacks by Muslims opposed to the presence of churches in El-Ameriya village in Alexandria and Abo Yacoub in Minya, leading to the arson and destruction of five Christian-owned houses and injuries to at least two Christians. In El-Ameriya, six suspects were arrested and released the next day; in Abo Yacoub, 16 were arrested but released on bail after victims withdrew their complaints during customary reconciliation, according to press reports. By year’s end, authorities had not referred any of the attackers to court in either incident.

Kidnappers disproportionately targeted Christians, according to International Christian Concern, a human rights organization. On April 5, unknown assailants kidnapped a 13-year-old Christian boy outside his school in the village of Mansheyet Manbal in Minya, according to press reports. The kidnappers released the boy 12 days after his family paid 300,000 EGP (\$16,700) in ransom. Police arrested the child’s three kidnappers on April 25 and returned the ransom money to his family. Also according to International Christian Concern, on May 12 a Muslim man abducted a 16-year-old Christian female from Bani Mazar, Minya and demanded 250,000 EGP (\$13,900) in ransom. Police rescued her two weeks later, after her family staged a sit-in at the Bani Mazar police station demanding that police take action against a known suspect. On May 26, police

raided the man's hideout, rescued the youth, and arrested the kidnapper, who had been torturing and abusing her, according to the organization.

On May 12, the makeshift Coptic Virgin Mary Church in the village of Ismailia, Minya was burned down, according to an official statement from the Minya Coptic Orthodox Bishopric. The congregation had been using the church for more than a year, with the knowledge of security agencies and local authorities, who had closed its previous location due to opposition from Muslim residents of the village. Police arrested two men on May 14 in connection with the crime.

On April 20, an Islamic militant group calling itself "Popular Resistance" claimed responsibility for setting fire to St. George Coptic Catholic Church in Luxor. The group issued a statement on Facebook stating it had set the fire as a "warning to the church to stop what happens against Muslims," alluding to perceived Christian support for the government.

On July 16, fire broke out in a second church in Luxor, Coptic Orthodox Archangel Michael Church, in Madamod village. No group claimed responsibility and authorities never announced a final determination as to whether the case was arson; however, according to one journalist, the congregation had faced resistance from "extremists in the area" when attempting to build the church.

Discrimination in private hiring continued to occur, according to sources within human rights groups and religious communities. According to the NGO Coptic Solidarity, Christians also faced discrimination in sports, especially soccer, with some players unable to pursue careers in sports or join prominent teams due to religious discrimination. The NGO stated that, despite passing selections stages, Christian athletes had been excluded from national and international competitions due to their religious identity. For example, it said that none of the country's participants in the last two Olympics was a Copt and that there were no Copts represented as players, coaches, or trainers in any of the clubs in the country's premier soccer league.

Islamic groups continued to use discriminatory speech against Christians in the press and on websites. In September the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood-associated Freedom and Justice Party published an op-ed on its website in which it denounced the new law governing the construction and renovation of churches. It called Christianity a "rogue sect" for challenging the beliefs of Muslims and said that Christians wanted to create a Christian state in Egypt, thereby changing the identity of society, and that Christians "look forward to the day Egypt becomes Christian."²⁹

The Islamic State-affiliate Wilayat Sinai targeted civilians perceived as collaborators and Christians, as well as security forces. In many cases, attacks against government forces also killed civilians. Seven Christians were murdered in Sinai between January 30 and February 23, 2017, in attacks that bore the hallmarks of Islamic State killings, though no group claimed responsibility.

²⁹ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

As a result, hundreds of Christian families fled to cities and towns outside Sinai, leaving almost no Christian families there.³⁰

Armed groups in North Sinai killed seven Coptic Christians between 30 January and 23 February 2017, prompting an unprecedented internal displacement of at least 150 Coptic families living in North Sinai. The authorities failed to offer them the necessary protection or appropriate compensation. In December, IS claimed responsibility for the shooting of 10 people in an attack on a church in Helwan in southern Cairo.³¹

At least two gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire outside a Coptic church south of Cairo on Friday, 29 December 2017, killing at least nine people in the latest attack on the country's Christian minority. The attack happened at the Marmina church in the Helwan City district on the capital's southern outskirts. The dead include members of the congregation and a police officer killed in a shootout at the security post guarding the building. Several others were wounded.³²

3. Jews

Jews: Government action

In 2016, material vilifying Jews and other anti-Semitic content continued to appear in Egypt's state-controlled and semi-official media. According to the State Department, Egyptian authorities have failed to take adequate steps to combat anti-Semitism in the state-controlled and private media. Egypt's once-thriving Jewish community of tens of thousands in the mid-20th century is now on the verge of extinction. It owns communal property, including synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria, and it finances required maintenance largely through private donations. Although some properties were refurbished during the year, many of the community's sites are in need of repair and/or renovation.³³

The government generally failed to take action against or condemn anti-Semitic comments that appeared in government-owned and private media. State-owned and private media used anti-Semitic rhetoric, including by academics, cultural figures, and clerics, and published cartoons and commentary demonizing Jews and Israel.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2018 - Egypt, 18 January 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1422452.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

³¹ Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Egypt, 22 February 2018, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1425021.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

³² The Guardian, Gunmen kill Christian worshippers at Coptic church near Cairo, 29 December 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/29/gunman-launches-deadly-attack-on-coptic-church-near-cairo> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

³³ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report – Egypt, 26 April 2017, available at https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1399397/5250_1494425701_egypt-2017.pdf [accessed 10 May 2018]

In May and June the government-owned newspaper *Al Ahram* published a five-week series of articles accusing Jews of “plotting to enslave the world,” “claiming that their religion is the only religion,” “inventing atheism,” “leading countries to religious and political extremism,” and staging an “economic takeover of the world.” Most of these allegations of “evil” referenced the long-debunked *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Positive coverage of the country’s Jewish community appeared in government-owned media as well. On May 30, state television aired an interview with the president of the Cairo Jewish community during which she spoke about Judaism as a religion and corrected what she said were misconceptions about the Jewish community in the country. The interview took place in one of Cairo’s remaining synagogues.

During the year, government officials took custody of historical records of births, marriages, deaths, and other community records of the greatly diminished Jewish community whose membership at one time exceeded 75,000 people. Officials stated that they were taking the records in order to preserve them, according to members of the community. The Ministry of Antiquities, which is charged with preserving Egyptian heritage, began to assess Egyptian Jewish heritage sites and to catalogue their contents; however, important Jewish religious and historical sites, including a grand synagogue in Alexandria and a millennium-old Jewish cemetery in Cairo, continued to deteriorate from decades of disuse. The newspaper *The Arab Weekly* estimated there were 19 synagogues in the country, a few in good condition, the others in very poor condition.³⁴

Jews: Societal attitudes

Societal anti-Semitism was widespread, including by media commentators. In May lawyer and political commentator Nabih Al Wahsh appeared in a television interview during which he accused Israel of shooting down Egypt Air flight 804 with a missile and of “exporting AIDS, aphrodisiac bubble gum, and all kinds of catastrophes” to the country. He called on “any Egyptian or Arab man who comes across an Israeli person to kill him and mutilate his body” and for “death squads to hunt down any Israeli anywhere in the world,” according to the Middle East Media Research Institute. Copies of anti-Semitic literature, including translations of *Mein Kampf*, were widely available for purchase.

In July professor and political activist Mamdouh Hamza posted a series of tweets in which he expressed his opposition to a rumored proposed law to sell Egyptian citizenship. Hamza said he feared Jews who had been forced out of the country in the 1950s and 1960s might return to “overturn Egyptian laws” and “confiscate” land. The press repeated Hamza’s statements.³⁵

³⁴ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

³⁵ Ibid.

Unrecognised Beliefs

Egypt's transition from an authoritarian regime to democratic state has been turbulent and chaotic for all Egypt's citizens, but particularly for its religious and ethnic minority groups.

Following the successful election in 2012 and subsequent ousting of President Morsi in 2013, attitudes held by some of the Sunni majority population have been further entrenched and continue to negatively impact Egypt's minority Coptic Christians, who form approx 10 per cent of the population, as well as Shi'a Muslims, Bahá'is and several smaller minorities including Ahmadis, Quranists and Jehovah's Witnesses.³⁶

1) Quranists

The Quranists are a small group of Muslims who regard the Qur'an as the only valid religious source for Islam. In Egypt, they have experienced state harassment due to its perception of the group as unorthodox. In 2007, for example, four Quranists were arrested while accused of defaming Islam, sparking condemnation from human rights groups. A Quranist writer was also detained at Cairo airport in November 2009 and refused the right to travel out of the country. In October 2010, a Quranist blogger was arrested in what was described as 'forced disappearance' and remained in prison for three months before being released.³⁷

2) Ahmadis

Ahmadiyya are followers of a modern Islamic sect that is considered heretical by some traditional Muslim scholars. In Egypt in March 2010, government security officials arrested 11 Ahmadis on charges of 'contempt of religion' and undermining national stability. They were detained for months before the final members of the group were released in June that year. A number of Ahmadis were also detained in December 2010.³⁸

3) Jehovah's Witnesses

There are currently 1,000-1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses living in Egypt: despite being a form of Christianity, the faith is not officially recognized. Congregations were formally established in the country from the 1930s and were able to practice with relative freedom until the 1950s. However, despite receiving formal recognition during this period, first in Cairo in 1951 and then

³⁶ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt: Challenging Discrimination Against Religious Minorities, 23 August 2016, available at <http://minorityrights.org/programmes-evaluations/egypt-challenging-discrimination-religious-minorities/> [accessed 5 May 2018]

³⁷ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Quranists of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/quranists-of-egypt/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

³⁸ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Ahmadis of Egypt, 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/ahmadiyya-of-egypt/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

in Alexandria in 1956, the Jehovah's Witnesses suffered an increasing wave of hostile rumours accusing them of being covert Zionists and a threat to national security. In 1959 they were obliged to halt their activities and the following year, like Bahá'í, were declared illegal by presidential decree. In the decade that followed, in particular, its adherents were exposed to serious ill treatment.

Despite repeated legal applications, court rulings have consistently denied them legal status, most recently in a December 2009 ruling. Nevertheless, in 2006 successful negotiations led to the government accepting their right to meet together in worship and prayer without interference, as well as granting them the right to meet in private in groups of up to 30 people. Nevertheless, incidents of surveillance and harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses by state security continued in intervening years. Though the situation appears to have improved slightly since Mubarak's departure in 2011, the group still faces monitoring and occasional obstruction of their right to worship.³⁹

4) Bahá'í

In 2009 Bahá'í finally secured the right to an identification card. However, as their faith remains unrecognized by the state, Bahá'í are obliged to put a dash in the space instead of their religious affiliation. Marriage and Bahá'í personal law are still not acknowledged by the state: married Bahá'í who have refused to be issued documentation that lists them incorrectly as 'single' still reportedly face difficulties in setting up a bank account and other basic freedoms. At present, the current legislation still refuses to recognize the validity of the Bahá'í faith and maintains their secondary status within Egypt. Their official 'invisibility' has also had a profound impact on their ability to participate in civil and political life. Bahá'í were also the target of hostility towards the end of Mubarak's regime and in the wake of his resignation, including the torching of several Bahá'í homes: the perpetrators remain unpunished.

Following the January 25 Revolution and the events of July 2013, when the army returned to power, the situation of Egypt's Bahá'í community is still uncertain. The prescriptions of the 1960 Presidential Decree, despite the revolution, have yet to be annulled. This means that despite the 2009 lifting of the restrictions on identification documents Bahá'í have still not received actual recognition as a religion from the state. Indeed, Bahá'í still face difficulties when seeking government-issued identification cards and are frequently subjected to public vilification. In December 2014, a public workshop was held by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to warn of the dangers of the spread of the Bahá'í faith in Egypt.

Their security also remains an issue. In February 2011, Bahá'í homes in Shouraneya were again set on fire, with some reports alleging the involvement of state security officers in the attack. Salafi leaders have also continued to agitate against Bahá'í as a threat to national stability. Furthermore, this discrimination has been replicated in subsequent legislation. The Constitutional Declaration of 2011, the 2012 Constitution drafted by the previous Morsi

³⁹ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Jehovah's Witnesses of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/jehovahs-witnesses/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

government and the subsequent 2014 Constitution of the Sisi government, while guaranteeing the ‘inviolable’ right of freedom of religion, extended this only to Islam, Christianity and Judaism – meaning that Bahá’i are still prohibited from many basic freedoms, such as practicing their religious laws and constructing places of worship. Though Bahá’í representatives lobbied during the constitutional drafting processes to expand religious freedoms to their community, this did not occur.⁴⁰

Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Center has issued fatwas over the years urging the continued ban on the Baha’i community and condemning its members as apostates. In recent years, the Ministry of Religious Endowments has sponsored public workshops to raise awareness about the “growing dangers” of the spread of the Baha’i faith in Egypt. Since Baha’i marriage is not recognized, married Baha’is cannot obtain identity cards, making it impossible to conduct daily transactions like banking, school registration, or car or home ownership.⁴¹

Despite constitution legislation which recognizes the freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination or persecution, mainstream political and religious opinion considers the Bahá’i faith as a ‘heretical sect of Islam rather than an independent religious movement’ and its adherents are seen as a threat to the public order. In 2009, Bahá’is were forced to flee their village after media coverage of the Bahá’i New Year celebration on national TV portrayed the celebration as an infringement on public safety.⁴²

The government did not prevent members of unregistered religious groups, such as Bahais, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, from worshiping privately in small numbers. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the government sometimes engaged in surveillance of their homes, questioned them about their activities, and continued to confiscate personally owned religious materials from them at airports. The government continued to ban the importation and sale of Bahai and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature.⁴³

5) Atheists

On February 23, Edko Misdemeanor court upheld Mostafa Abdel-Naby’s three-year prison sentence for denigrating religion for declaring his atheism and insulting Allah on Facebook in 2014.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Minority Rights Group International, Egypt – Baha’i of Egypt, last updated in October 2017, available at <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/bahai-of-egypt/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

⁴¹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report – Egypt, 26 April 2017, available at https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1399397/5250_1494425701_egypt-2017.pdf [accessed 10 May 2018]

⁴² Minority Rights Group International, Egypt: Challenging Discrimination Against Religious Minorities, 23 August 2016, available at <http://minorityrights.org/programmes-evaluations/egypt-challenging-discrimination-religious-minorities/> [accessed 5 May 2018]

⁴³ US Department of State, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt, 15 August 2017, available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1407792.html> [accessed on 25 April 2018]

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Lawmakers in Egypt are seriously considering passing a law that would make atheism illegal. Blasphemy is already illegal in Egypt, and people are frequently arrested for insulting or defaming religion under the country's strict laws. The newly proposed rule would make it illegal for people not to believe in God, even if they don't talk about it.

"The phenomenon [of atheism] is being promoted in society as freedom of belief, when this is totally wrong," Amro Hamroush, head of Egypt's Parliament's committee on religion, said when he introduced the bill in late December. "[Atheism] must be criminalized and categorized as contempt of religion because atheists have no doctrine and try to insult the Abrahamic religions," he wrote in the local daily paper *Al-Shorouq*.

On Thursday, the Committee on Religion announced it would prepare an explanatory note on the draft law in the coming days. It is unclear how authorities would determine who is an atheist if the person does not speak about it. Egypt's highest Islamic religious organization, Al-Azhar, supports the proposed law, and its top officials said it would work to punish those who had been "seduced" by atheism.

Egypt started targeting atheists more vigorously shortly after the 2014 inauguration of President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. The new government announced a plan to "confront and eliminate" atheism. Some officials even described atheism as one of the biggest threats facing Egypt. Most recently, Egyptian security forces arrested a 29-year-old computer science graduate for administrating a Facebook page that promoted atheism. He is being held awaiting further investigation.⁴⁵

An atheist has been kicked off a live TV show in Egypt after the host accused him of being "confused and unreliable" and being in need of psychiatric treatment. Mohammad Hashem was presenting his reasons for being an atheist on Alhadath Alyoum TV when host Mahmoud Abd Al-Halim told him he was being "inappropriate". Former deputy sheikh of Al-Azhar, Mahmoud Ashour, who was also on the programme, agreed, telling him: "Look dear Mohammad, you need psychiatric treatment. Many young people today suffer from mental illnesses due to material or mental circumstances." Mr Al-Halim then asked Mr Hashem to leave, saying: "We cannot promote such destructive ideas...you set a very bad example for the Egyptian youth. He added: "I advise you to leave the studio and go straight to a psychiatric hospital."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Newsweek, Egypt could make atheism illegal amid harsh crackdown on nonbelievers, 5 January 2018, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/egypt-atheism-illegal-crackdown-non-believers-religion-islam-772471> [accessed 7 May 2018]

⁴⁶ The Independent, Atheist kicked off live Egypt TV show for 'inappropriate' ideas, 9 March 2018, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypt-tv-atheist-kicked-off-live-believe-in-god-islam-muslim-religion-allah-blasphemy-illegal-a8247651.html> [accessed 7 May 2018]

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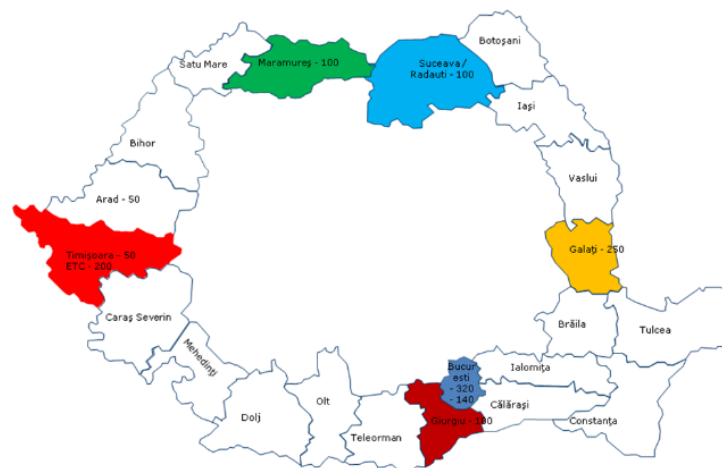
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