

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Egypt generally trended consistent with 2021. The government continued to make overtures toward religious minority communities and to promote [religious tolerance](#). For example, under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the government appointed the first-ever Christian [judge](#) to the Supreme Constitutional Court in February. Egypt also continued its cultural heritage preservation program, announcing the [restoration](#) of more historic synagogues. In May, authorities convicted and [sentenced](#) the “extremist Islamist” [murderer](#) of a Coptic Orthodox priest. The government also [continued](#) reviewing and approving Christians’ applications to register their worship sites as churches.

However, restrictions on new church construction and the slow pace of approvals for the backlog of legalization applications filed since the Church Construction Law of 2016 have forced many congregations to assemble in structurally [unsafe](#) buildings not [intended](#) for communal worship. In August, the government attributed a series of [deadly](#) fires at several Coptic Orthodox churches to faulty electrical setups and other structural deficiencies, which [human rights](#) organizations identified as a result of [systemic](#) discrimination against Copts. Rights organizations have also noted that the 2016 legislation is inherently [discriminatory](#) in continuing to subject churches to requirements and approval [processes](#) that do not apply to Sunni mosques. The 2016 law also offers no legalization process for the houses of worship of Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha’is, Shi’a Muslims, and other religious groups. In addition, even after successfully registering, some churches continued to face threats. In June, the government’s approval of the license for Luxor’s [Archangel Michael Church](#) prompted some Islamist residents of that and other villages to riot and set fire to Copts’ personal property.

State security and prosecutors continued to invoke the blasphemy statute and other laws to arrest, detain, convict, and

sentence Egyptians from a diverse range of religious backgrounds. Reports of individual violent assaults against Copts increased, with several [attacks](#) unfolding in April during the seasons of Christian Easter and Muslim Ramadan. This included crimes such as the fatal stabbing of [Father Arsanios Wadid](#) and the deadly shooting of Rani Ra’fat by six men, one of whom [posted](#) social media videos confirming a militant Islamist motivation for the murder. In July, another assailant stabbed the [father and son](#) owners of a shop in Giza that sold alcohol—a practice associated with non-Muslims. Coptic women suffered both anti-Christian and female-targeted abuse, such as the suspected kidnapping and potential [forced conversion](#) to Islam of Mariam Waheeb and a male pharmacist’s [physical assault](#) of Naveen Sobhi for appearing in non-Islamic dress during the Muslim holy days of Ramadan. The latter case is notable for the police’s pressuring of the victim to agree to adjudication by a local, nonjudicial “[reconciliation](#)” session, which [doubly victimizes](#) Copts and other minorities by forcing them to reconcile with their attacker, commonly resulting in [lenient](#) punishments for assailants. In February, Egypt’s child-fostering laws and practices attracted scrutiny when authorities removed a [four-year-old boy](#) from his Coptic Orthodox adoptive family and placed him in an orphanage upon discovering his origins as an unidentified infant that a priest had found in the local church. Although prosecutors reportedly invoked laws presuming the Muslim identity of unknown children, in December, Egypt’s National Council for Human Rights [asserted](#) the illegality of the child’s transfer to the orphanage, urging the government to return him to his would-be adoptive parents. Personal status laws regulating family matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance also disproportionately burden [religious minorities](#), especially [women](#). In December, President El-Sisi encouraged “all segments of society” to participate in [dialogue](#) surrounding draft amendments to these [laws](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to withhold a portion of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for specified international religious freedom violations along with broader human rights concerns; and
- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into U.S.-Egypt bilateral engagement by

encouraging Egypt to: 1) ensure equal protection of all religious communities, including through phasing out customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of violence against religious minorities and proposing universal “houses of worship” legislation that treats identically the construction, repair, and registration of houses of worship of all religions; 2) repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and until that is

accomplished limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail; and 3) lift all travel bans and asset freezes on released religious prisoners of conscience and establish independent oversight and appeals mechanisms for travel bans.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Egyptian Curriculum Reform](#)
- **Event:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Egyptian Curriculum Reform](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Egypt’s Release of Coptic Activist Ramy Kamel](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commends Release of Egyptian Religious Prisoner Reda Abdel Rahman](#)

Background

Article 2 of [Egypt's constitution](#) identifies Islam as the state religion and the “principles of Shari’a” as the primary source of legislation. Article 64 provides for “absolute” freedom of belief, although only adherents of “heavenly religions” (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) may practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Bans from 1960 remain in effect on [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) and [Baha'is](#).

Egypt's population is approximately [107.7 million](#), an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Non-Sunni Muslims such as Shi'a comprise less than one percent. At an estimated 10 percent or more, Egypt's indigenous Copts constitute the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. Christian leaders [estimate](#) over 90 percent of Copts belong to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church, with [Coptic Catholics](#), Coptic Evangelical Protestants, and other small denominations comprising the remainder. There are [reportedly](#) up to 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 10 Jews in Egypt.

State Targeting of Religious Identity, Expression, and Activism

The Egyptian criminal justice system remained the locus of systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. In January and February, authorities released from long-term detention religious prisoners of conscience [Ramy Kamel](#), a Copt, and [Reda Abdel Rahman](#), a Qur'anist Muslim. Both [Abdel Rahman](#) and [Patrick Zaki](#)—a Coptic human rights researcher [released](#) at the end of 2021—remain under [travel bans](#). Throughout 2022, Zaki also endured numerous adjournments of his trial for the charge of “spreading false news” via the publication of an online testimonial discussing anti-Coptic discrimination. In June, Al-Mataria prosecutors wielded the same charge to detain Coptic attorney [Hani Farouk Gibran](#)—[later releasing him](#)—for posting messages on social media such as, “No to attacks on churches in Egypt, burning homes and kidnapping girls.”

Egypt continues to enforce [Law 98\(f\)](#) of Egypt's Penal Code, a blasphemy statute that bans “insulting the heavenly religions.” In September, an appeals court in Cairo upheld a five-year prison sentence against [Marco Girgis](#), a Copt, on charges including breach of 98(f) and “exploiting religion in promoting extremist ideas, contempt of Islam, and transgression of the values of the Egyptian family” for allegedly sharing sexually explicit digital material. In June, United Nations human rights experts [expressed concern](#) over the detention and potential deportation of [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#), a Yemeni asylum seeker and convert to Christianity accused of “contempt of Islam.”

Egyptians of Sunni Muslim backgrounds also faced government harassment and detention. In February, the Court of Cassation [rejected the appeal](#) of imprisoned blogger [Anas Hassan](#), arrested in 2019 for administering an “Egyptian Atheists” page on Facebook and charged

with violation of 98(f) and information technology laws. Also that month, the public prosecutor stated it would order “[investigative measures](#)” against journalist and television presenter [Ibrahim Issa](#) for his public statements questioning a miracle connected to the Prophet Muhammad. In August, the Heliopolis Misdemeanors Court [announced](#) the trial of another television personality, Islamic preacher and Al-Azhar instructor Mabrouk Attia, for on-air jokes about Jesus Christ following a lawyer's filing of a criminal complaint that the statements showed contempt for both Christianity and Islam.

Authorities also arrested or detained individuals related to mob protests and attacks on Christian churches; however, several such detainees were members of targeted church communities. In January, security officials arrested [nine Copts](#) for online videos showcasing their peaceful protest of the government's failure to permit the rebuilding of the fire-ravaged St. Joseph and Abu Seifein Church in Samalout. Charges included “participating in a demonstration threatening public safety and committing a terrorist act.” They were [released](#) in April, the same month the government [relaunched](#) its Presidential Pardon Committee, possibly [in advance](#) of the 27th Conference of the Parties, or [COP27](#) climate summit, which Egypt hosted in November.

Educational Curriculum Reforms

The government of Egypt implemented some religious tolerance reforms to the national primary and secondary school educational curricula consistent with its 2021 [National Human Rights Strategy](#). However, a USCIRF [assessment](#) found that despite slight improvements, religionization of the curriculum remained endemic. Subjects such as Arabic Language and Social Studies advanced government-endorsed versions of Sunni Islam while underrepresenting, excluding, or negatively characterizing—for example, using antisemitic rhetoric toward—religious minorities such as non-Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S.-Egypt strategic partnership assumed an even higher profile throughout the year in advance of the [COP27](#). Despite Egypt's robust efforts to rehabilitate international [perceptions](#) of the country's human rights violations, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden and the U.S. Congress took measures to communicate concerns over Egypt's human rights record. As in 2021, Congress conditioned up to \$300 million of the \$1.3 billion annual FMF aid package to Egypt on human rights improvements. However, in September, the administration chose to withhold only [\\$130 million](#). In approving the other \$170 million, the United States noted part of the grant was due to President El-Sisi's release of 500 political prisoners out of the total of [more than 60,000](#) in detention. The withheld aid accounted for 10 percent of the United States' total annual allocation to Egypt.