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2008 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Shari'a (Islamic law) is the primary source of legislation.

Although there were some positive steps in support of religious freedom, the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government declined overall during the period covered by this report. Members of non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Government generally worship without harassment and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries. However, members of religious groups that are not recognized by the Government, particularly the Baha'i Faith, experience personal and collective hardship.

A lower court ruling interpreted the Constitution's guarantee of religious freedom as inapplicable to Muslim citizens who wish to convert to another religion. This ruling is under appeal. Separate court rulings provided for 13 Christian born converts to Islam to obtain identity documents indicating their conversion back to Christianity and allowed some Baha'is to obtain civil documents. However, the courts included requirements effectively identifying the Christian converts and Baha'is as apostates, potentially exposing them, if implemented, to risk of significant discrimination by both governmental and societal agents. In addition, a lower court held that the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion does not apply to Baha'is.

Furthermore, governmental authorities detained some converts from Islam to Christianity, some religious freedom advocates, and some Christian children of parents who converted to Islam. The Government again failed to redress laws and governmental practices that discriminate against Christians, effectively allowing their discriminatory effects and their modeling effect on society to become further entrenched. According to some observers, police responses to some incidents of sectarian violence were slow.

There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society during the period covered by this report. There were several violent incidents in Upper Egypt, including an attack by Bedouins on the Abu Fana monastery, arson attacks on Christian-owned shops in Armant, and an attack on a Coptic Church and Coptic-owned shops in Esna. Muhammad Higazy, who converted from Islam to Christianity, received death threats and went into hiding with his wife after his case received wide attention in the Arabic language media.

The Ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of Congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials. Specifically, embassy officers and other U.S. State Department officials raised concerns

with the Government about ongoing discrimination faced by Christians in building and maintaining church properties, official discrimination against Baha'is, and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert to other faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles and a population of 79 million, of whom almost 90 percent are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians ranged from 8 to 12 percent, (6 to 10 million), the majority of whom belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The country's Jewish community numbers 200, mostly senior citizens.

Other Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches which range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. An evangelical Protestant community, established in the middle of the 19th century, included 16 Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Episcopal (Anglican), Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, 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)). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status in the 1960s. There are 800 to 1200 Jehovah's Witnesses and small numbers of Mormons but the Government does not recognize either group. The number of Baha'is is estimated at 2,000 persons.

Christians are dispersed throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There are many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, who have had a presence in the country for almost a century. These groups engaged in education, social, and development work.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, under Article 46, provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites; however, the Government restricts these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Shari'a is the primary source of legislation.

The Government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity or other religions, and resistance to such conversions by local officials – through refusal to legally recognize conversions – constitutes a prohibition in practice. January 2008 rulings by the Cairo Administrative Court stated that freedom to convert does not extend to Muslim citizens. This was under appeal at the end of the reporting period. It also ruled that constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion do not apply to Baha'is. Conversion is not illegal under civil law, but, in practice the Government does not recognize conversions of Muslim-born citizens to other religions. However, in January 2008 the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that the Ministry of Interior (MOI) must issue identity documents indicating the conversion back to Christianity of some Christian-born converts to Islam.

While there is no legal ban on proselytizing Muslims, the Government restricts such efforts. Neither the Constitution nor the Civil and Penal Codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.

For a religious group to be officially recognized, it must submit a request to the Religious Affairs Department of the MOI, which determines whether the group would, in

its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The Department also consults the leading religious figures, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who, if he concurs, issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under Article 98(F) of the Penal Code, which forbids the "denigration of religions." The Government last recognized a new religious group in 1990.

All mosques must be licensed by the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (*Awqaf*). The Government appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The Ministry of Awqaf reported that there were 100,006 mosques and small dedicated prayer areas called "zawayas" nationwide as of April 2008. A 2004 decree by the Minister of Awqaf removed from governors the authority to issue permits to build mosques and placed private mosques under *Awqaf* administrative control. However, approximately 5,000 mosques and zawayas remain unsupervised by the Ministry.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree, partially still in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, MOI regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi decree, specify a set of ten conditions that the Government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance between a church and a mosque not be less than 100 meters (340 feet) and that approval of the neighboring Muslim community be obtained before a permit to build a new church may be issued.

In 2005 President Mubarak issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's 26 governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to the local authorities. Decree 291 noted that the governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified supporting documents, within thirty days of submission. According to the new decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches.)

Two and a half years after promulgation of Decree 291/2005, church and lay leaders complained that the permit process remains susceptible to delay by local officials. They charged that some local authorities refused to process applications without certain "supporting documents" that were virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that had been established during the country's monarchical era). Others complain that some local authorities categorize routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting of walls and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects, thus requiring formal permits versus simple notification. They also maintain that security forces blocked them from using permits that had been issued, and at times denied them permits, for repairs to church buildings and the supply of water and electricity to existing church facilities. Such incidents often depended on the attitude of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church and on their personal relationships with representatives of the churches. As a result, congregations have experienced lengthy delays – years in many cases – while waiting for new building permits.

Local authorities have closed down unlicensed places of worship. As a result of restrictions, some communities use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits.

Constitutional amendments, approved by referendum in March 27, 2007, have unclear

implications for religious freedom. The amended Article 1 of the Constitution states that the country's political system is based on the principle of citizenship. The amended Article 5 prohibits the formation of political parties or the conduct of political activities on a religious basis. Government supporters argued that these changes would separate religion from politics. Some critics argued, however, that the amendments are incompatible with Article 2, which continues to state that Shari'a is the basis for legislation.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the Government recognizes only the three "heavenly religions," Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Shari'a, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Shari'a. The Government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Shari'a as practiced in the country, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men.

Under Shari'a as interpreted by the Government, a non-Muslim wife who converts to Islam must divorce her "apostate," non-Muslim husband. Upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities ask the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to, divorce proceedings begin immediately and custody of children is awarded to the mother.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights but may be provided for in testamentary documents.

Under Shari'a, converts from Islam lose all rights of inheritance. However, because the Government offers no legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, the converts' loss of inheritance rights may not be indicated on civil documents.

In the absence of legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resort to soliciting illicit identity papers, often by submitting fraudulent supporting documents or bribing government clerks who process the documents. In such cases, authorities periodically charge converts with violating laws prohibiting the falsification of documents.

The law prescribes administrative steps pursuant to the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The minor children of such converts, and in some cases adult children, may automatically become classified as Muslims by the Government irrespective of the religion of the other parent. This practice is in accordance with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

Government authorities sometimes fail to uphold the law in sensitive conversion cases. Local authorities sometimes allow custody of a minor Christian female who converts to Islam to be transferred to a Muslim custodian, who is likely to grant approval for a marriage opposed by the girl's Christian parents. (Although the minimum age for marriage is 18 for both men and women, girls who are at least 16 but not yet 18 may marry if they have the approval of their parents, or, in cases where the girl asserts that she has converted to Islam, with the approval of a Muslim guardian.)

According to the Government's Instructions for Notaries Public, which implement Law 114 of 1947, persons age 16 and above may convert to Islam without parental consent. Christian activists assert that ignorance of the law and social pressure, including the centrality of marriage to a woman's identity, often affect a girl's decision to convert. Family conflict and financial pressure also are cited as factors.

The Government reportedly halted the practice of requiring religious "advice and guidance sessions" in the case of Christian-born converts to Islam in 2006 without any prior notice or discussion. For many years, those guidance sessions had been instrumental in resolving disputed conversion cases; in many instances, Christian girls returned to their original faith and families.

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities and strips Baha'is of legal recognition. During the Nasser era, the Government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries. The Government has asserted that national identity cards require all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews. The MOI has reportedly, on rare occasions, issued documents that list a citizen's religion as "other" or simply do not mention religion; however, it is not clear when these conditions apply. Baha'is and other religious groups not associated with any of the three "heavenly religions" have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or go without valid identity documents.

Those without valid identity cards also encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Baha'is at age 16 face additional problems under Law 143/1994, which makes it mandatory for all citizens to obtain a new identification card featuring a new national identification number. Police occasionally conduct random inspections of identity papers and those found without identity cards can be detained until the document is provided. Some Baha'is without identity cards reportedly stay home to avoid police scrutiny and possible arrest.

The law provides for "khul'" divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. Many women have complained that after being granted khul', the required child support is not paid.

The Coptic Orthodox Church excommunicates female members who marry Muslim men and requires that other Christians convert to Coptic Orthodoxy to marry a member of the church. Coptic males are prevented from marrying Muslim women by both civil and religious laws. A civil marriage abroad is an option should a Christian male and a Muslim female citizen decide to marry; however, their marriage would not be legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in specific circumstances, such as adultery or conversion of one spouse to another religion.

The Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1960 since which time it has, to varying degrees, subjected them to harassment and surveillance. The Witnesses were legally registered in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956 and their presence in the country dates to the 1930s. The Government attributes its refusal to grant the Jehovah's Witnesses registration to the opposition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has condemned the group as heretical, as well as to its lingering Nasser-era suspicion of links between Witnesses and the State of Israel.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works that it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) at Al-Azhar University has legal authority to censor and, since 2004, confiscate, any publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*Hadith*). In recent years, the IRC has also passed judgment on the suitability of nonreligious books and artistic productions. Al-Azhar has the legal right to recommend confiscations, but must obtain a court order to do so.

The Government granted confiscatory authority to Al-Azhar University and acted on its recommendations. In 2003 the Ministry of Justice issued a decree authorizing Al-Azhar sheikhs to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no reports of the exercise of this authority

during the reporting period.

The Government has not granted legal recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than 30 years. The Government has raised no objection. Some members, particularly those who have converted to the LDS Church overseas and then returned to the country, complain of excessive surveillance from State Security and sometimes avoid meetings from fear of harassment.

The Government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, which operates missionary, charitable, and political activities, in 1954 but has tolerated its operations with varying levels of interference. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly about their views and identify themselves as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary detention and pressure from the Government.

The Government at times prosecutes members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony.

The Government has advised journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitism. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

The quasi governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with furthering 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. Five of its 25 reappointed members, as well as its president, are Copts.

The NCHR, in its fourth report, issued in March 2008, reported that it received 35 complaints from Christian families alleging that their daughters were missing. The NCHR referred these complaints to the MOI, which in most cases replied that the women had eloped with Muslim men, converted to Islam of their free will, and had chosen to leave their families without prior notice because they feared reprisal on the part of their families. The report also stated that the NCHR had received 29 formal complaints pertaining to religious freedom, which it sent to relevant authorities for action. The NCHR received an additional 21 complaints from Baha'is who were denied government identification documents. In its report, the NCHR called on the Government to permit the designation "Baha'i" on government identification documents (see Restrictions on Religious Freedom).

The local media, including state television and newspapers, give prominence to Islamic programming. Christian television programs are aired weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV. The weekly religion page of the prominent daily *Al-Ahram* often reports on conversions to Islam and claims that converts improved their lives and found peace and moral stability.

The Ministry of Education bans wearing the *hijab* (Islamic head veil) in primary schools and allows it only in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

In January 2008, continuing a practice that resumed in 2005, Jewish pilgrims (mostly visitors from Israel) celebrated the Abu Hasira festival despite a 2004 Supreme Administrative Court decision banning the annual festival at the tomb of Rabbi Abu Hasira in a village in the Nile Delta.

The Government observes Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Coptic Christmas (January 7) as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Cairo Administrative Court, a court of first impression, in its January 29, 2008 rulings in the case of *Hasan Husni Naguib 'Abd-al-Masih (a Baha'i) vs. the Minister of Interior* (Action No. 12780 of JY 61) interpreted the country's constitutional provision of freedom of opinion and belief to mean that non-Muslims are free to adopt Islam, free to continue in their faith, and free from compulsion to convert to Islam. However, it stated that the freedom to practice religious rites is subject to limits, especially the maintenance of public order, public morals, and conformity to the provisions and principles of Islam, which forbid Muslims to convert. The Court stated that "public order" is defined as the official religion being Islam, that most of the population professes Islam, and that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation.

The trial court's January 29, 2008, ruling in three cases brought by members of the small Baha'i minority held that the Government must issue official identification documents containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. Despite the positive aspects of the ruling, there were also restrictive aspects. The Court noted that a purpose of filling the religion field with a dash or other distinctive mark was to protect members of the "revealed religions" – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – from Baha'i infiltration and avoid potential dangers from such persons' conduct and relations with them. The ruling stated that anyone who adopts the Baha'i Faith is an apostate and that the religion cannot be recorded in any civil status or other official document, because that would conflict with public order. In a statement published in the January 31, 2008 edition of Cairo's *Rose al-Yousef* newspaper, Al-Azhar University, through its Islamic Research Council, expressed its support of the 29 January court ruling. Members of the council affirmed that the Administrative Court ruling allowing these Baha'is to leave the religion section vacant or to enter the word "other" does not violate the prior decision of the Islamic Research Council, which did not recognize the Baha'i Faith as a congregation, a societal, political or religious entity. In a discussion organized by the National Council for Human Rights on June 6, the MOI confirmed that it intended to implement the January 29 ruling as soon as a legal challenge was resolved.

The decision followed a December 16, 2006, Supreme Administrative Court ruling deciding that Baha'is may not list their religion in the mandatory religion "field" on obligatory government identity cards. In May 2006 the MOI had appealed an administrative court ruling issued in April 2006 which supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive identity cards and birth certificates with the Baha'i religion noted on the documents. In response to requests to remove the religion field from national identity cards, the Government insisted that such identification was necessary to determine which laws apply in civil cases. This policy required Baha'is to dissimulate that they were adherents of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, to obtain necessary civil documents. The Government stated that all citizens must be in possession of new computerized identification cards by January 1, 2007, and that old, hand-written cards would no longer be valid. However, in May 2007 the Government extended the deadline for the use of the old identity cards as a temporary measure until January 2008. The Government has issued passports for Baha'i citizens. (National passports do not indicate the holder's religion.) Citizens not in possession of valid identity documents may be subject to detention.

Although the Cairo Administrative Court's January 29, 2008, ruling in the case of Muhammad Mahmud al-Sadiq vs. the Minister of Interior ordered that 13 "reconverts" be issued identity cards noting "Christianity" in the religion field, there were also potentially restrictive elements of the ruling in that the court ruled that the new identity cards and birth certificates must also indicate that the holder "previously embraced Islam." The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights warned the Government that any such public reference could subject converts to social stigma and discrimination. The head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights stated to Reuters that "this may solve some procedural issues, but ... will open the door to discrimination against those citizens by extremist officers or civil servants when they see in the entry that they left Islam." The court held the "recording of a conversion" from Islam to Christianity in the personal identity card does not "establish" the apostasy of the card holder. However, it held that failure to

convey the holder's apostasy would conflict with public order, implying that identifying apostates serves as a warning mechanism to the society at large.

In its January 29, 2008 decision in the case of Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy vs. the Minister of Interior et al, the Cairo Administrative Court noted that the country ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Article 18 provides for absolute freedom of religion, with a reservation, namely, that the covenant shall be ratified to the extent that it does not conflict with Islamic law.

In early 2007 the Government began holding "reconciliation sessions" to address grievances between Muslims and Christians following sectarian attacks and conflicts. However, Coptic leaders have begun refusing to participate, reportedly out of concern that the sessions did not result in restitution for losses incurred or in the perpetrators being brought to justice. Coptic Pope Shenouda III rejected the idea of holding a reconciliation session concerning the May 31, 2008 assault on Abu Fana Monastery, according to press reports. *Watani* newspaper reported on December 30, 2007, that a Copt bishop refused initial requests by politicians in Esna for a reconciliation session between Copts and Muslims following a December 16-17, 2007, assault on a local church and 26 shops owned by Copts, unless those responsible were brought to justice and the victims indemnified. Human rights leaders criticized the sessions as "cosmetic" and a "humiliation since it holds the victim and the attacker to be equal, and bypasses justice by allowing the culprits to escape scot-free, secure in the knowledge that attacking Copts and destroying their churches or property warrants no penalty whatsoever." Following the bishop's statement of conditions for holding a reconciliation session, one was held which led to the reportedly unprecedented result of indemnity being paid to Copts who suffered property damages as victims of sectarian violence.

The approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays, often measured in years. Although government officials maintain that President Mubarak approves all requests for permits presented to him, independent critics charge that delays by the MOI and/or local authorities cause many requests to reach the President slowly or not at all. Some churches have complained that local security officials have blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit has been issued. Others suggest unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects. Many churches face difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials.

According to statistics published in the *Official Gazette*, the President issued decrees authorizing construction of 10 Protestant churches, 3 Coptic churches, 2 Catholic churches and a multid denominational cemetery. No statistics were available on the number of requests made.

Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III inaugurated on November 20, 2008, the first church in New Cairo district, Tagammu' Al-Khamees, and on December 12 inaugurated the first church in Obour City. Church authorities first applied in 2005 for permits to build the church in Tagammu' Al-Khamees and in Obour City. Other churches inaugurated during the reporting period include: St. John the Soldier Church and St. Amir Tadros El Shatby in Beni Mazar; Archangel Michael Church in Luxor; St. Bigol and Bishay Church in the Red Monastery of Sohag; the Church of Mother Doulagy and her Children in Qena Governorate after its reconstruction and expansion; St. Mary and St. George Church in Alexandria; the Cathedral at Seryan Monastery of Wadi Al Natroun; and St. Mark Church in Beni Mazar.

On Feb 17, 2008, the Governor of Assiut announced that he had recently issued 200 permits for church renovations.

On November 13, 2007, *Al Gomhouriya* newspaper reported that the South Sinai Local Council rejected a Vatican request for permission to construct a Catholic church in Sharm El Sheikh.

Local government officials have refused to issue a building permit for a new church in

the Arbaeen District of Assiut for a decade, despite a 1997 order from the President and approval from the MOI to issue it. The President issued decrees allowing the Coptic Orthodox churches in Assiut's El Hamra District and Burg al Arab, Alexandria Governorate to construct new churches, but they have been waiting for construction permits to be issued since 1997 and 1988, respectively.

Local government officials in Assiut Governorate revoked a license to reconstruct the church belonging to the Church of the Brethren shortly after it was granted in June 2001, and construction has been halted for the past 7 years. Church representatives reportedly began the application process in 1997, intending to replace their church building, whose dilapidated condition posed safety hazards. Local police reportedly halted construction after the old building was razed in preparation for building the new one.

The St. George Church in Dafesh, near Assiut, applied for a permit to rebuild their church 26 years ago, but continued to worship at the old church site at the end of the reporting period. The local governor had granted the permit 18 years after it was requested, but the Government halted construction in 2000, reportedly because the church had not obtained a presidential decree for the building permit.

The MOI continued to prevent renovation of St. John the Baptist Church at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut, begun 7 years ago, and at the end of the reporting period the congregation continued to meet for worship in a tent erected in the small courtyard of the church. The governor of Assiut issued a decree for a permit to undertake renovations in 1999 that was renegotiated with the State Security in 2001 to allow for enlargement. Church representatives initiated their request for a renovation permit in 1999.

In January 2008 authorities blocked the restoration of the Church of Mar Mina near Beni Suef. The permit was issued on January 16. Work started immediately, and was halted on January 28.

Governmental authorities in al-Marg, near Cairo, continued to refuse to allow construction to renovate the Archangel Mikhail of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Ezbet al-Nakhl, demanding that they obtain a presidential decree even though the law no longer requires it and the work was approved by the MOI in 1996 and by the governor of Cairo in 2001.

There were reports that the Government began harassing some Christian clergy and other Christian leaders at the international airport in Cairo while they were passing through immigration to board flights, and that they confiscated address books, written materials, and various forms of recordable media.

Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years. Anti-Semitic articles and opinion pieces appeared in the print media, and editorial cartoons in the press and electronic media. Anti-Semitism in the media was common, although less prevalent than in recent years, and anti-Semitic editorial cartoons and articles depicting demonic images of Jews and Israeli leaders, stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis were published throughout the year.

On August 16, 2007, *Al-Gumhuriyya* published an article alleging that Jews use the Holocaust to achieve economic gains from the world by inflating the number of Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

On July 26, 2007, *Al-Ahram* published an article denouncing Israel and the support it receives from America and describing Israel and Zionist Jews as "new, defiant, [and] insensitive to death." The article contends that Jews are "intoxicated and corrupt with power ... thus subverting the ethical meaning of the Holocaust." As a follow-up to the preceding article, *Al-Ahram Weekly* published an article on August 9, 2007, reiterating the equation of Zionism with Nazism as well as racism and the allegation that Jews and

Zionists exploited the accusation of anti-Semitism to mute criticism.

On September 16, 2007, the Deputy Chair of the Egyptian Human Rights Council was quoted in *Al-Gumhuriyya* responding to a question on the reasons for the West's animosity toward Islam as saying, "The first reason is that the Jews are trying in all sorts of ways to weaken the Muslim and to establish blocs not only against Muslims but also against other religions."

During the year Jehovah's Witnesses continued to engage the Government on their request to be granted legal registration, but the Government refused. Representatives from the Jehovah's Witnesses' New York headquarters, accompanied by European colleagues, visited the National Council for Human Rights, the Arab League, and others (see Abuses of Religious Freedom).

On February 22, 2008, the lower house of Parliament, the People's Assembly, passed a law banning political protests "inside or around" places of worship. The law permits the imposition of jail sentences and fines on demonstration organizers. Commentators tended to regard that the bill's intention was to prevent political gatherings in mosques.

During the period covered by this report, hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members were arrested and charged with membership in an illegal organization, planning to revive the activities of the banned group, possessing anti-government leaflets, obstructing the Constitution and the law, and organizing demonstrations without obtaining prior security permission. Authorities prevented several members from traveling abroad. After a militia-style demonstration and parade by mask-wearing Muslim Brotherhood students at Al-Azhar University on December 14, 2006, the Government arrested scores of Muslim Brotherhood activists, including their third-ranking official, Khairat Al-Shatir. In January 2007 the Government announced plans to try Shatir and 39 other Muslim Brotherhood members before military tribunals. Despite two separate court rulings ordering the release of Shatir and his coaccused, the Government commenced the military tribunal at Haykstep military base, near Cairo, on April 26, 2007. On April 15, 2008, 25 defendants, including Shatir, were convicted and sentenced to terms ranging from 3 to 10 years in prison. Fourteen others were acquitted.

Eighty-eight independent members of Parliament associated with the Muslim Brotherhood served in the People's Assembly during the reporting period. In the run-up to the April 8, 2008 local council elections, security forces detained hundreds of potential Muslim Brotherhood candidates to prevent them from running. The Muslim Brotherhood ultimately boycotted the elections.

The Government generally tolerated foreign religious groups. However, the Government over the past several years, including during the reporting period, refused reentry into the country of several individual expatriates whom they reportedly suspected of proselytizing Muslims.

There were no reports of authors facing trial or charges related to writings or statements considered heretical during the reporting period.

On October 20, 2007, the Research Center of Al-Azhar ordered that distribution of the book, *My trip with the Shiites and the Shiite doctrines in Egypt*, by the Egyptian writer Ahmed Rasim Nafees, be halted.

On March 15, 2007, police raided the Nile Christian Book Shop owned by the Church of God in Egypt. Police arrested an employee and confiscated books, compact discs, and issues of a newspaper. Authorities interrogated the employee for more than 5 hours and released him after he posted bail.

Islamic Research Center officials asserted that noted feminist Nawal Al-Sadawi's play, *God Submits his Resignation at the Summit*, constituted extreme disrespect for Islam. Two lawsuits are pending against Al-Sadawi, and she remained outside of the country at

the end of the reporting period.

According to the newspaper *Al Wafd*, on April 17, 2008, the authorities prevented 450 Catholic citizens from attending Easter celebrations in Jerusalem. No reason was announced for the decision.

The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed, and, in general, the Government upholds these constitutional protections; however, government discrimination against non-Muslims exists. There are no Christians serving as presidents or deans of public universities, and they are rarely nominated by the Government to run in elections as National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. Christians, who represent between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold less than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council.

As of June 30, 2008, there were 6 Christians (5 appointed, 1 elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; 6 Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; 2 in the 32-member cabinet; and one governor of the country's 28 was Christian. There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Public funds compensate Muslim imams but not Christian clergy.

Government practices discriminated against Christians in hiring for the public sector and staff appointments to public universities, and barred them from study at Al-Azhar University (a publicly funded institution). In general, public university training programs for Arabic language teachers bar non-Muslims because the curriculum involves study of the Qur'an. In an interview on September 16, 2007, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi said he had no objection to Christian students studying at Al-Azhar University, provided they enroll in the courses on Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic law, and the Qur'an.

On March 1, 2008, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court ruling requiring the Coptic Church to allow remarriage following a civil court divorce order. The Coptic Church opposed the Court's order and was reportedly considering legal options at the end of the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On May 31, 2008, police located within 1 mile of the Abu Fana Monastery in Upper Egypt reportedly took 3 hours to respond to a request for help when a monk's cell at the monastery was under attack. The armed assault resulted in the death of one Muslim Bedouin villager, multiple injuries, including gunshot wounds, to monks, the kidnapping and abuse of several monks, and looting and damages estimated at more than 1,000,000 Egyptian pounds. Three monks abducted from the monastery were reportedly rescued by security services (see Societal Abuses and Discrimination).

On January 29, 2008, the Cairo Administrative Court, a court of first impression, ruled that the administrative agency of the Civil Status Department was not bound to examine the request of Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy to have his new religion, Christianity, recorded on his national identity card as so doing would conflict with public order. In its ruling, the court wrote that Muslims are forbidden from converting away from Islam based on principles of Islamic law, and because such conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and an enticement for other Muslims to convert. The court asserted its duty to protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam and to protect public morals, especially if the apostate petitions the administration to condone his misdeed and his corrupt caprice. In August 2007 Mohamed Ahmed Higazy and his wife Zeinab had publicly announced that they had converted to Christianity and wished to be legally recognized as such. The ruling maintained a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. Higazy's attorney appealed the case in March 2008, and it remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period.

The Government continued to deny civil documents, including identity cards, birth

certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community. However, on January 29, 2008, the Cairo Administrative Court ruled that the MOI must issue identification documents to Baha'is, with the religious affiliation space filled with a dash. While the ruling was not applied to other Baha'is, members of the Baha'i community reported anecdotally that the ruling was assisting them in obtaining some civil documents (see Introduction and Legal/Policy Framework).

The newspaper *Al-Badeel* reported March 16, 2008, that school officials prevented student Kholoud Hafez Abdou from sitting for her final graduating examinations because she identified herself as a Baha'i on her examination admission application. Students are required to enter their religion on the application form necessary for admission to the examination. This case generated extensive media coverage, and the Ministry of Education overruled the administrator's decision. The Ministry of Education resolved the matter by asking Kholoud to fill out another application form with dashes entered in the religion field of the application.

On July 15, 2007, a female convert from Islam to Christianity, Shaimaa Muhammad al-Sayed, was rescued by police while being beaten in public by attackers and arrested following police verification that she was the daughter of one of the attackers who claimed that she was a convert to Christianity and that he had previously filed a missing persons report on her. She was found to be in possession of a falsified identity card listing her religion as Christianity and reportedly held on charges of falsifying a government document. The Office of Prosecutor General, Supreme State Security Prosecution, in Cairo ordered her release on July 22, 2007, and confiscated both her original identity card and the counterfeit one. According to credible reports, after her release, her father beat her in front of the police station.

On May 29, 2007, State Security agents arrested three men affiliated with the Qurani movement, a small group of Muslims who rely largely if not exclusively on the Qur'an as authoritative for Islam, to the exclusion of the prophetic traditions (*Hadith*) and other sources of Islamic law. On May 31 and June 17, 2007, they arrested two additional Quranis. One detainee reported to a lawyer with an independent human rights organization that prior to June 30, 2007, he had been beaten and threatened with rape by a State Security investigator. On October 5, 2007, authorities released the five men.

In December 2007 the authorities arrested 25 members of the Islamic Al-Ahbash sect, including three Lebanese and a Kazakh, on charges of membership in an illegal organization and contempt for religion. In February, the Public Prosecutor ordered the release of the men, without charges. The non-Egyptians were reportedly deported.

On March 12, 2007, the Alexandria Court of Appeal upheld the conviction of 22-year old student blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman. On February 22, 2007, the Alexandria Criminal Court convicted him of "denigrating" Islam and insulting President Mubarak through his blog entries and sentenced him to 4 years in prison (3 for denigrating Islam and 1 for insulting the president). On November 6, 2006, Alexandria security forces arrested Abdel Karim, whose blog entries had contained strongly worded critiques of the practice of Islam and Al-Azhar's Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. Abdel Karim had previously been detained on account of his writings for 18 days in October 2005. He had been expelled and reported to the authorities by Al-Azhar University for criticizing Islamic authority. He remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

On August 8, 2007, police detained Adel Fawzi Faltas Hanna, a retired doctor and president of the Middle East Christian Association's (MECA) Egyptian branch, and Peter Ezzat Hanna, a photographer for MECA and the *Copts United* Web site. The authorities investigated the two men's activities, on charges including allegedly denigrating Islam and disturbing the public order. On July 7, 2007, Nader Fawzi, in his capacity as president of MECA, had filed a lawsuit naming President Mubarak and five senior ministers as defendants, accusing the Government of failing to properly investigate the al-Kosheh incident of January 1-3, 2000, in which 21 Copts were killed, others wounded, and Copt properties destroyed, and concerning which the perpetrators were not brought to justice and no indemnity to the victims or their families was paid. Also, near the time

of the arrests, the MECA had publicly indicated its support of Muhammad Higazy, who had announced that he was suing the Government for the right to have his conversion to Christianity indicated on his civil documents.

The police also raided the Cairo homes of Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat and reportedly confiscated several copies of a MECA publication, *The Persecuted: The Story of the Coptic Nation*. On November 4, authorities released Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat following 3 months in detention. On November 5, authorities arrested three other MECA affiliates, whom authorities also investigated for a variety of charges, including denigrating Islam. On December 26, 2007, authorities released the three men without charges.

During the reporting period, State Security agents reportedly detained at least two Jehovah's Witnesses and, during interrogations, threatened them and their families with ongoing harassment unless they agreed to become informants on the Witness community. Witness leadership also reported that authorities monitored the homes, telephones, and meeting places of Jehovah's Witnesses and interrogated them in some cases. International Witness leadership reported that at least three Witnesses were beaten while in police custody in 2007, 2006, and 2005. While Witnesses have reported varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by government agents since 1960, senior international Witness leadership believed that their engagement of the Government over the past 2 years concerning their request for official recognition had resulted in a diminishment of the policy of harassment and hostile surveillance.

The Government continued to try citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs. In 2005 the Maadi misdemeanor court issued a verdict in a blasphemy case involving Ibrahim Ahmad Abu Shusha and 11 of his followers, who had been detained absent an arrest warrant since 2004. The court sentenced Abu Shusha to 3 years' imprisonment for claiming to be divine and denigrating Islam. The court sentenced the 11 other defendants (including 3 women, 2 of whom are Abu Shusha's wives) to 1 year of imprisonment and ordered the confiscation of the leaflets and writings that propagated the group's ideology. In its reasoning, the court stated that there was sufficient evidence that Abu Shusha embraced beliefs that are contrary to and derogatory of Islam and that he tried to propagate those beliefs by attempting to show that he possessed divine powers. The court also asserted that freedom of belief does not include permission to deny the principles of heavenly religions. An appeals court reaffirmed the Abu Shusha sentences in July 2005. At the end of the reporting period, Abu Shusha's lawyers were seeking to appeal his case to the Court of Cassation and his case remained pending.

While there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity.

In April 2005 State Security authorities detained Bahaa Al-Accad, a citizen who was born Muslim but who reportedly converted to Christianity. Accad was initially held at Tora Prison, south of Cairo. After a court ordered Accad's release from detention in August 2006, State Security authorities deliberately ignored the ruling, eventually transferring him to Wadi el-Natroun Prison, located 60 miles north of Cairo along the highway to Alexandria. On April 28, 2007, the authorities released Accad after he had spent almost 2 years in prison without being formally charged with any crime.

The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity.

In May 2006 public prosecutor Maher Abdul Wahid ordered two Azharites, Abdul Sabur al-Kashef and Mohammed Radwan, to be tried by a low-level criminal court on charges of blaspheming Islam. Kashef was prosecuted for claiming to have seen God while Radwan was prosecuted for denying the existence of heaven and hell. Al-Kashef was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment while Radwan received 3 years. In mid-January 2007 El-Gamaleya Misdemeanor Court of Appeals reduced Kashef's sentence to 6 years' imprisonment and upheld the earlier ruling of 3 years for Radwan. At the end of the reporting period, they remained in prison.

On November 21, 2007, Shadia Nagy Ibrahim, 47, was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly falsely claiming to be Christian, a charge arising from her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962. She had listed her religion as Christian on her marriage certificate in 1982, not knowing that her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962 made her official religion Islam, according to the country's interpretation of Islamic law. On January 13, 2008, the Public Prosecutor ordered her release. On May 5, 2008, her sister, Bahya Nagy Ibrahim, was reportedly arrested on similar charges. She remained in custody at the end of the reporting period.

There were reports that the Government began harassing some Christian clergy and other Christian leaders at the international airport in Cairo while passing through immigration for flights, and that they confiscated address books, written materials and various forms of recordable media.

On November 22, 2007, police detained Siham Ibrahim Muhammad Hassan al-Sharqawi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, on the outskirts of Qena, 300 miles south of Cairo, who had been in hiding since 2003. She was interrogated for 4 days and released.

In August 2007 authorities investigated seven Copt employees of the MOI in fraud and bribery cases in connection with re-converts to Christianity. The investigation was reportedly ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

An estimated several thousand persons were imprisoned during the reporting period because of alleged support for – or membership in – Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the Government. The Government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the state of emergency allows them to renew periods of administrative detention indefinitely.

Forced Religious Conversion

On September 3, 2006, the Alexandria Administrative Court ruled that the father of Mario Medhat Ramses, 11, and Andrew Medhat Ramses, 13, could convert his sons to Islam, despite their objections and those of their Christian mother. The father had previously converted from Christianity to Islam. The children's mother appealed to the Cairo Supreme Administrative Court, and the case remained pending at the end of the reporting period. In May 2007 the two sons refused to take an Islamic religion exam and on August 25, the Ministry of Education announced that they would be promoted to the next grade despite their refusal to complete the religion exam.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion carried out by the Government; however, there were again reports of forced conversions of Coptic women and girls to Islam by Muslim men. Reports of such cases are disputed and often include inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. Observers, including human rights groups, find it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involve a female Copt who converts to Islam when she marries a Muslim male. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.

Wafaa Constantin, a Christian woman whose alleged conversion to Islam in December 2004 sparked significant protests in Cairo, remained in seclusion in a Coptic church facility. During the reporting period, the Administrative Judicial Court of the State Council considered a lawsuit filed by Islamist Yusuf al-Badri and 10 attorneys demanding that Wafaa Constantin be handed over to Al-Azhar, on the strength of her declaration that she had embraced Islam. As a Muslim citizen, he argued, the Church has no jurisdiction over her in accordance with Article 2 of the Constitution. On April 24, 2007, the State Council ruled that Constantin had chosen to remain Christian. At the end of the reporting period she remained in seclusion in a church facility.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who may

have been abducted or illegally removed from the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 29, 2008, the Cairo Administrative Court ruled in three cases brought by members of the country's small Baha'i minority that the Government must issue official identification documents containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. In early April the MOI announced that it would not appeal the court's ruling. The January 29, 2008 decision has reportedly resulted in progress for other Baha'is seeking government identification documents, including the issuance of birth certificates and passports.

On February 10, 2008, the Supreme Court of Administrative Justice ruled in a case brought by 12 converts to Christianity, who were originally Christian but had converted to Islam, that the Government must issue them personal identity documents and birth certificates listing their religion as Christianity and that they previously embraced Islam. The ruling is not subject to appeal but has not yet been implemented or applied to hundreds of other cases brought by similar converts with the same request. The constitutionality of the ruling was challenged in early March as being in violation of Article 2 of the Constitution, which stipulates that Islam is the state religion and the constitutional challenge remained pending at the close of the reporting period. The ruling overturned an April 24, 2007 ruling by a lower court that held that the MOI was not obligated to recognize the reconversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam.

In July 2007 Ali Gomaa, Grand Mufti of the Republic, announced in an interview that that a Muslim may choose a religion other than Islam.

The country's only Copt governor, appointed last year in Qena, was re-appointed in April 2008 as one of the country's 28 governors.

On July 13, 2007, the daily *Rose Al Youssef* reported that the Governorate of Aswan donated 3,000 square meters of state-owned lands to establish the first rest house for the archbishopric of Aswan.

In a reportedly unprecedented step in the aftermath of sectarian violence, following violent attacks on Copt properties in the Upper Egypt city of Esna on December 16 and 17, 2007, the Government ordered the payment of a total of \$230,000 (LE1,265,000) as indemnity to Christian business owners who suffered losses in the violence. The money has reportedly been paid. A priest of the Church of the Holy Virgin, which was attacked, reportedly stated that paying compensation was a good step towards restoring Copts' rights and preventing the recurrence of such incidents.

On February 25, 2008, Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mohamed Tantawy opened the Al-Azhar-Vatican Inter-religious Dialogue Conference. The Al-Azhar-Vatican committee issued a final communiqué highlighting statements by Pope Benedict on the need for Christianity and Islam to respect each other's religious beliefs and symbols. The meeting was the latest in a series involving the Islamic university and the Vatican.

In March 2008 the quasi governmental NCHR released its fourth annual report, in which it recommended a solution for official recognition of Baha'is, discussed the complaints of Jehovah's Witnesses, and criticized both religious textbooks in schools and the curriculum taught in the Imams' Institution affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education for failing to address human rights topics. The report also encouraged the Government to pass a law for all religious groups addressing the construction of new places of worship. The NCHR urged the People's Assembly to discuss the unified places of worship bill during the current parliamentary session. The NCHR also called for the formation of a permanent national anti-discrimination league. The league would be charged with the elimination of any form of discrimination based on religion, gender or ethnic origin.

On March 27, 2008, independent newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* reported that Baha'i citizens celebrated their New Year publicly without interference.

On April 11 and 12, 2008, the first national conference of the organization Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination (EARD) was held. Although the Government had recently denied the EARD's application for NGO status, it did not object to its holding the conference. In 2007 more than 170 political and human rights activists, Muslim and Christian intellectuals, and academics launched EARD to promote religious tolerance and combat discrimination against non-Muslims.

In November 2007 the country's Jewish community celebrated, publicly and with the support of the Government, the 100-year anniversary of the Adly Street Synagogue.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Although Christians and Muslims share a common culture and live as neighbors throughout the country, violent sectarian attacks on Copts continued to occur during the reporting period, as they have in previous years.

On May 31, 2008, in the province of al-Minya, a large group of Muslim Bedouins with automatic firearms assaulted monks and laborers on land bordering the Abu Fana Monastery, which monks were been cultivating. In the attack one Muslim died, three to seven Christians were wounded, and several monks were abducted and abused. Ownership of the agricultural lands is disputed. Al Jazeera quoted an eye witness who stated that some of the 60 to 70 assailants destroyed an outer wall that was under construction, while others destroyed property and set fire to a monk's chapel, which reportedly burned Bibles, altars, and Christian symbols. Multiple reports, including a June 20, 2008 statement by the Holy Synod Committees of the Coptic Orthodox Church, asserted that three monks were taken hostage and tortured, beaten, and told to spit on the cross, and that the kidnappers attempted to force them to convert to Islam upon pain of death before being rescued by local police. Coptic Pope Shenouda III stated, "This is the first time they kidnap and torture monks. The issue is becoming critical," according to *Sawt al-Muhajir*. Pope Shenouda stated that the attack indicated an "absence of security." The provincial governor publicly pledged to the Pope that he would take action to calm sectarian tensions in his province and assured him the stolen items, valued at \$188,000, would be returned. No charges against perpetrators were filed, although at the end of the reporting period, 13 of the attackers remained in custody. Two monks were reportedly detained for 2 days. There was also an attack on the monks in January 2008.

On February 9, 2008, Muslim citizens set fire to Christian-owned shops in the village of Armant in Upper Egypt after reports surfaced of a love affair between a Muslim woman and a Coptic Christian man. Security forces deployed in the town closed shops under a security decree and detained eight Muslims and one Copt, all of whom were subsequently released.

From the evening of December 16, 2007, until the following morning, a number of Muslim inhabitants of the Upper Egypt town of Esna attacked a church, damaging a door and 26 Copt-owned shops. According to a January 2, 2008 report by the National Democratic Party, the Muslim men went to every Christian Coptic property in the town and destroyed about 17 shops. The rampage was reportedly sparked by rumors that a Copt shop owner lifted the veil of a Muslim woman he suspected of shoplifting from his store. For the first time, the local and national Government quickly agreed to pay compensation to Coptic business owners who suffered damage in the violence. According to reporting in *Watani* newspaper, Qena's Copt governor, Magdy Ayoub, distributed the checks, which amounted to a total value of \$230,000 (LE1,295,000). Esna's mayor, who is also the town's secretary general of the NDP, reportedly condemned the violent incident and said that he headed the committee that estimated the damages. According to reports, a Copt bishop refused initial requests by politicians for a reconciliation session between Copts and Muslims unless the culprits were brought to justice and the victims indemnified. Police detained the Christian shop owner and his father, reportedly

for "security reasons," and released them several days later. The investigation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On January 25, 2008, the Egyptian daily newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reported that the father of Muhammad Higazy, a convert to Christianity, had threatened to kill him publicly if he continued to refuse to return to Islam. Higazy and his wife went into hiding following death threats and reportedly remained as such at the end of the reporting period.

On December 12, 2007, Esna police placed two Copts in detention after they were attacked by a group of Muslim men, reportedly because they were thought to have been involved with a Muslim woman. The two men, Bishoi Ishaq and Michael Milad, were placed in custody for "security reasons" and released after 15 days in detention.

In June 2007 Minya Governor Fouad Saad-Eddin granted the Monastery of Gabal-al-Teir permission to resume building the fence around monastery property. According to media reports, on October 25, 2007, construction workers were attacked by Muslim residents of neighboring villages. A number of workers were reportedly injured, and while police investigated, no charges were filed. The local government subsequently held a reconciliation meeting.

On September 21, 2007, rumors of a love affair between a Muslim woman and a Coptic Christian man sparked sectarian clashes in Alexandria. Reportedly dozens of Muslims and Christians fought and hurled bricks at each other following Islamic Friday evening prayers. Nine people were injured and about 9 cars were destroyed in the clashes before security forces were deployed to the area and detained 25 people. The prosecution office ordered their detention for 4 days pending investigations. All were released without charges.

Sectarian assaults on and/or harassment of Christians also occurred in Ezbet Adam in Qena Governorate in mid-April, Qasr Hur Village in Minya Governorate on April 20, 2008, Minya University on May 20, in Defash Village in Minya Governorate on June 8, and in Fayoum in late June.

In March 2008 the Franciscan Sisters School in Cairo, a private institution, refused to implement a judicial order, obtained by a father of a sixth-grade student, to stop the implementation of the school's decision to prevent the entry of veiled students. Consistent with the Ministry of Education ban on wearing the veil in public primary schools, the Government took no action against the school.

Pope Shenouda III has banned travel of Copts to Jerusalem since the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. However, press reports, citing Israeli Interior Ministry statistics, indicated that an estimated 735 Copts visited Israel in 2004 for pilgrimage. There were no statistics available for subsequent periods. According to *Al-Ahram* on September 4, 2006, Pope Shenouda III forbade Copts to go to Jerusalem and stated that anyone who visits Jerusalem while it is still under the Israeli occupation would be subject to "ecclesiastical punishment," including the deprivation of communion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. Government, including by visiting members of Congress, the Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, the Ambassador, and other State Department and embassy officials. The Embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Embassy also regularly discusses religious freedom matters with other government officials, including governors and members of Parliament. The Ambassador has made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically, the Embassy and other State Department officials raised concerns with the Government about ongoing discrimination

faced by Christians in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005, official discrimination against Baha'is, and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert.

U.S. embassy officials maintain an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. U.S. embassy officials investigate complaints of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. They also discuss religious freedom matters with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside of the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services that work with Coptic community groups in Upper Egypt, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for occurrences of sectarian bias.

The U.S. Government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a civic culture that promotes religious tolerance, and supporting projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between different religious communities.

The Embassy supports the development of educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curriculums.

Embassy officials also worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.
