

EGYPT

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Egypt continued to trend tentatively in a positive direction. The country saw a decrease in radical Islamist violence and anti-Christian mob attacks, some progress in implementing the registration process for unlicensed churches and related buildings, and the launch of a government program to address religious intolerance in rural areas. However, systematic and ongoing religious inequalities remain affixed in the Egyptian state and society, and various forms of religious bigotry and discrimination continued to plague the country's Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

In terms of positive trends, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and other high-ranking government officials continued to advocate publicly for religious inclusivity, including again attending Coptic Orthodox Christmas Mass in January and remarking during an [Islamic holiday](#) in June on the need for mutual respect between Muslims and Christians. Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb of al-Azhar, Egypt's renowned institution of Sunni Islamic learning, joined with Pope Francis and other religious leaders in signing a landmark statement on interfaith co-existence, "[Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#)," in Abu Dhabi in February. Egyptian government sources reported to USCIRF on the launch of a new program by the Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents to promote religious tolerance in sectarianism-plagued Minya Province, including a door-to-door messaging campaign in 44 villages. The Ministry of Education continued efforts, previously reported to USCIRF, to reform public school curriculum to eliminate intolerant references and promote inclusivity and respect, although how much progress the ministry made during 2019 was unclear. Several high-profile court cases resulted in the [conviction of perpetrators](#) of religiously

motivated violence, including the April [conviction of a police officer](#) for killing two Coptic men in front of a church in Minya in late 2018. Other government initiatives sought to support efforts to revitalize several important non-Muslim religious heritage sites, including the completion of a project [to restore](#) the fourteenth-century Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria as well as [ongoing projects](#) to restore Christian monasteries in the Sinai and Naga Hammadi.

Despite those positive signs, religious discrimination remained pervasive, including a disparity in policies regarding places of worship, a lack of opportunities for non-Muslims to work in key areas of government service, state security harassment of former Muslims, and recurring incidents of [anti-Christian violence](#), particularly in rural areas. In June in the village of Naga al-Ghafir in Sohag governorate, for example, [Muslim rioters](#) surrounded a Coptic Orthodox church, chanted sectarian slogans, and beat congregants with sticks. The violence led local security forces to close the church in direct violation of [Law 80/2016](#), commonly known as the Church Building Law, which mandates the continuing operation of such facilities as they await approval for formal registration. Such violations have become commonplace; local government authorities [have closed](#) at least 25 churches and church-related facilities since the passage of the law in 2016, including three in 2019—one of which was reopened in January 2020—while the government has issued few permits for new churches in previously occupied residential areas. Instead, authorities have granted nearly all such permits or pledges in planned satellite cities rather than in Upper Egypt, where thousands of Christians have no local churches in which to worship, such as Copts in the Qena-area village of Faw Bahari whose de facto place of worship [police shuttered](#) in December.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Explicitly dedicate a portion of resources, set aside as part of the U.S. efforts to train and equip Egyptian security forces to combat terrorism, for the protection of places of worship and other holy sites;
- Urge the Egyptian government to cease the longstanding practice of ceding legal authority to customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of sectarian mob violence, repeal decrees banning Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, remove religion from official identity documents, and pass laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs supporting efforts to reform public school curriculum and teacher training and to promote greater religious inclusivity throughout the country; and
- Require the State Department to provide explicit justification for the release to Egypt of any previously withheld Foreign Military Financing (FMF), including public disclosure of its assessment and certification of Egypt's progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.

Background

Egypt's constitution identifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of Shari'a as the primary source of legislation. While article 64 of the constitution states that "freedom of belief is absolute," only Muslims, Christians, and Jews can practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Of the country's estimated 104 million people, [around 90 percent](#) are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi'a Muslims, comprise less than 1 percent. An estimated 10 percent are Christians, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; other Christians belong to various denominations that include Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and others. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 20 Jews.

The Egyptian government continues to struggle with balancing domestic security, advancing [economic development](#), and protecting citizens' fundamental rights. Security forces have struggled to end Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) activity in North Sinai, and the country faces active threats from Muslim Brotherhood-related radical Islamist groups, such as Hasm. Government authorities have used these real security threats as a pretense to repress civil society, harassing and imprisoning journalists, lawyers, and activists. In the most recent such wave of harassment, [security forces raided](#) the offices of Mada Masr—one of the last remaining independent news outlets in the country—just one day after they arrested and indefinitely detained [Ramy Kamel](#), a prominent Coptic activist, and announced plans to try him on [spurious charges](#). Such activities directly contradict the government's assurances that it is working to improve conditions for civil society, including a highly touted reform of the Nongovernmental Organizations Law that was announced in August to mostly [mixed-to-critical reactions](#). Kamel's arrest illustrates that religious freedom—at the core of his activism in prior years—is an integral part of a broader context of human right and societal freedoms.

Implementation of the Church Building Law

In 2019, the Cabinet committee charged with implementing the registration of informal churches and church-related buildings under Law 80/2016 made some limited progress in approving applications—a process for which Coptic Orthodox and Protestant leaders alike have expressed their support, including Pope Tawadros II. The committee had approved only 627 applications by the end of 2018; in 2019, it cleared an additional 725—bringing the total to [1,412 approved applications](#), or just over [25 percent of 5,515](#) currently in process. However, most of these approvals have been conditional, pending security, safety, and other forms of review; only around [200 church properties](#) have received final approvals for registration. Furthermore, this progress has only taken place for preexisting, de facto churches,

mainly for rural Christian communities that had no other access to local places of worship. The governing authorities have issued few to no permits for new churches in previously inhabited communities while shuttering around 25 churches since the passage of the law, including several in 2019. At its root, Law 80/2016 also avoids addressing the long-term, systematic disparity between religious communities. Muslim worshippers face no such registration restrictions, so even with the recent church approvals, there is approximately one mosque for every 820 Muslims and one church for every 2,430 Christians—roughly a 320 percent disparity.

Rural Sectarianism

Anti-Christian mob attacks remain endemic in parts of rural Egypt despite a clear decline in the number of such incidents in 2019, but legal impunity for the perpetrators persisted as the systematic norm. Compared to eight mob attacks in 2018, only three were reported in 2019, although each incident resulted in the usual impunity for attackers and two resulted in illegal church closures. In January, a mob [forced the closure](#) of an informal church in Manshiyet Zaafarana, Minya; a [similar incident](#) occurred in Sohag governorate in April, as noted previously. In June, rumors circulated in the village of Eshnein al-Nasara, Minya, that a Coptic man, Fady Youssef Todari, had posted comments critical of Islam on Facebook, resulting in a group of Muslims from the village [attacking his family's home](#). Police briefly detained several members of the victimized family and arrested Todari, and it is unclear whether he remains in detention. Furthermore, local authorities stood by as community leaders convened a "calming meeting" shortly after the incident—which, given the lack of any subsequent legal proceedings, implicitly absolved the attackers of responsibility.

Key U.S. Policy

[Bilateral relations](#) between the United States and Egypt remained steady in 2019, a crucial partnership that has weathered countless challenges since its establishment following the Camp David Accords of 1979. U.S. financial assistance, mostly in the form of FMF, remained largely consistent at \$1.4 billion in FY 2019 and an anticipated \$1.38 billion for FY 2020. The administration of President Donald J. Trump has praised President El-Sisi's efforts to counter radical Islamist violence and ideology and initiatives [to improve](#) religious freedom conditions in Egypt. The United States [also announced](#) in December \$6 million in additional support through USAID to bolster educational and economic development programs in North Sinai. However, U.S. officials harshly criticized Egypt's unfair imprisonment of Mustafa Kassem, a U.S. citizen imprisoned since 2013 who died in January 2020 following a hunger strike. During a subsequent event in Berlin, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [reportedly "expressed outrage"](#) to President El-Sisi over Kassem's "pointless and tragic death."

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Hearing: [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- Webinar Series: [Webinar #1: Egypt](#)
- Press Statement: [USCIRF Condemns Egypt's Arrest of Coptic Activist Ramy Kamel](#)

**INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF
COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE**

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves enormous credit for taking the religious freedom agenda into his personal portfolio. It is he, the Egyptian President himself, who has led by example on many occasions and, despite, all the complications of running the Arab world's largest country, often in the crosshairs of terrorists, he continues to take seriously, and to work personally, to create interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence among religious communities within Egypt. His grand gestures have mattered, and his attention to detail has made a profound difference. I commend him for it all. I have also appreciated his absolute willingness to indulge in direct and brutally honest conversations with various interlocutors along the way.