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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Executive Summary

The constitution states that “freedom of belief is absolute” and “the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine religions [i.e., the three Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism] is a right regulated by law.” The constitution states citizens “are equal before the law” and criminalizes discrimination and “incitement to hatred” based upon religion. The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation but stipulates the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and allows only their adherents to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. “Disdaining and disrespecting” the three Abrahamic religions and supporting “extremist” ideologies are crimes.

In September, a court in Tora sentenced a man to 14 years in prison for the 2013 mob killing of a Shia scholar and three of his followers. In June, a Cairo court sentenced Salafi preacher Mahmoud Shaaban to 15 years in prison for “inciting violence, opposing the state, and supporting a terrorist group.” Shaaban accused authorities of denying him medical treatment while he

was incarcerated. The government summoned, tried, and sentenced several individuals, including Muslim, Christian, and atheist authors, social media content creators, and private citizens, for actions deemed offensive to Islam or Christianity. Human rights groups called the religious defamation laws vague, overly broad, and a threat to freedom of expression and called for their repeal. Authorities released Coptic researcher and activist Ramy Kamel, detained since 2019 for blasphemy, and Quranist Reda Abdel Rahman, detained since 2020 on charges including membership in ISIS. The Ministry of Interior pardoned five police officers convicted of torturing a Coptic man to death in 2016 after they had served one year of a three-year sentence. A court released a woman detained for five months after she reported her coworkers had assaulted her for not wearing a hijab.

An academic writing for a human rights nonprofit organization said nonbelieving Coptic prisoners in the country felt compelled to attend meetings with religious counselors, lest their absence imply atheism, making them “more vulnerable to violence by jailers and prisoners.” In May, the government approved the full reopening of mosques and shrines, lifting most remaining COVID-19 restrictions, although it maintained the 10-minute limit on Friday sermons and reportedly continued to limit some Sufi celebrations, citing COVID-19 concerns. The government continued to allow Baha’is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Shia Muslims to worship privately in small numbers, but it continued to deny their requests to hold public religious gatherings or build houses of worship. Baha’is continued legal action to have authorities designate a cemetery for individuals whom the government considered not to be Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. The government continued to restrict the content of sermons in mosques. In September, authorities released the *National Counterterrorism Report*, which outlined the roles the Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) and al-Azhar al-Sharif (al-Azhar), the main authority on theology and Islamic affairs, played in countering religious extremism. Authorities attempted to monitor websites for “extremist” content and to block Shia websites in general. In June, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (Ministry of Education) announced grades four through six would begin using a textbook on respect for human rights and religious tolerance that was already in use in grades one through three.

The government continued the process of registering unlicensed churches that were built prior to 2017, legalizing the status of 125 such churches during the year. Following an accidental fire in a Giza church that killed 41 worshippers in August, church leaders criticized government restrictions on renovating or building churches and poor government emergency preparedness. Human rights groups and some Christian community representatives continued to characterize government-sponsored customary reconciliation sessions as

encroaching on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship and denying Christians the opportunity to pursue justice through the courts. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Coptic Solidarity said there was a “2 percent glass ceiling” on Copts in entry-level positions in the judiciary, military, police, and diplomatic corps as well as limits on their participation in the upper ranks of other government positions. On February 8, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued a decree appointing Judge Boulos Fahmy Iskandar Boulos, a Copt, to head the Supreme Constitutional Court, the first Christian so appointed. On June 25, the Administrative Court of the State Council ruled it had no jurisdiction in a lawsuit Coptic human rights attorneys filed in 2021 seeking removal of the “religion” field from national identity cards. In April, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities began restoring the historic Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, a nonworking synagogue that functioned as a museum and tourist attraction.

Terrorist groups, including Islamic State-Sinai Peninsula (ISIS-SP), continued sporadic attacks on government, civilian, and security targets in the North Sinai Governorate. In August, terrorist groups killed at least two civilian Copts in Sinai, reportedly based on their religious identity. There were reports during the year of Muslims killing and injuring Copts based on their religious identity. Religious discrimination in private sector hiring continued, according to human rights groups and religious communities, including against the Shia community. Coptic communities continued to report incidents of disappearances of female members of the community that, in some cases, families said were related to abductions or forced conversions to Islam; security authorities occasionally assisted efforts to locate them. Shia community members again said that they risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought. There were reports that some public venues discriminated against women wearing hijabs. Al-Azhar faculty members generated backlash on social media by suggesting that women dress modestly and obey their husbands to avoid being the victims of violence and wife beating. In June, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) announced the Coptic Orthodox Church had donated Saint Menas Church in Giza, near Cairo, for use as the ROC headquarters in Africa, reportedly prompting Pope and Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa Theodoros II to criticize Coptic Pope Tawadros II for interfering in Theodoros’ “direct administrative and pastoral jurisdiction.”

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with government officials and religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with Muslim and Coptic leaders as well as with senior pastors of the Coptic Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican churches, representatives of the Jewish community, and representatives of

unrecognized minorities, including Shia Muslims, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and atheists. In these meetings, embassy officers emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom and raised concerns, including prospective changes to the country's Personal Status Law, lack of legal recognition for religious minorities, reported harassment of religious converts, and the continued use of religious designations on national identity cards. The embassy partnered with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to host the country's first-ever Holocaust Remembrance Day Commemoration; attendees included the president of the National Council for Human Rights and representatives from the Jewish community, universities, and research organizations.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 107.8 million (midyear 2022). Most experts and media sources estimate approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and 10 percent is Christian. Scholars and NGOs estimate Shia Muslims comprise approximately 1 percent of the population. There are also small numbers of Dawoodi Bohra Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims.

Approximately 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders. Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population. These include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Coptic Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Latin, and Syrian), Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), and Anglican/Episcopalian and other Protestants. Most Protestant denominations are members of the umbrella group the Protestant Churches of Egypt, also known as the General Evangelical Council. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and fewer than 100 members of the Church of Jesus Christ, the vast majority of whom are expatriates. Christians reside throughout the country.

Baha'i representatives estimate the size of their community to be between 1,000 and 2,000 persons.

According to a local Jewish NGO, there are six to 10 Jews in the country, residing in Alexandria and Cairo.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists; in 2020, local media sources quoted a former Minister of Culture and a scholar at al-Azhar University as estimating numbers of atheists at “several million” and “four million,” respectively. Boston University’s 2020 World Religions Database stated there are approximately 700,000 atheists and agnostics.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation. The constitution states that “freedom of belief is absolute” and “the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine [Abrahamic] religions is a right regulated by law.” The constitution also states citizens “are equal before the law,” prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, and makes “incitement to hatred” based upon “religion, belief, sex, origin, race...or any other reason” a crime. It prohibits political activity or the formation of political parties based on religion.

The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and allows only their adherents as defined by the government to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. The constitution defines al-Azhar, the main authority on theology and Islamic affairs, as “an independent scientific Islamic institution with exclusive competence over its own affairs... It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language” worldwide. The constitution requires the state to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes.” Al-Azhar’s Grand Imam is elected by al-Azhar’s Council of Senior Scholars and is officially appointed by the President for a life term. The President does not have the authority to dismiss him.

By law, capital sentences must be referred to the Grand Mufti, the country’s highest Islamic legal official, for consultation before they can be carried out. The Grand Mufti’s decision in these cases is consultative and nonbinding on the court that handed down the sentence.

The constitution stipulates the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. Individuals are subject to different sets of personal status laws regarding such matters as marriage, divorce, and inheritance depending upon their official religious designation. The

Ministry of Interior issues national identity cards for citizens that include official religious designations. Designation options are limited to “Muslim,” “Christian,” or “Jewish.” Although the government designates Jehovah’s Witnesses as “Christian” on identity cards, a presidential decree bans their religious activities. Since a 2009 court order, Baha’is and other citizens belonging to unrecognized religious groups may have their religious affiliation denoted by a dash (“-”) on national identity cards. The Minister of Interior has the authority to issue executive regulations determining what data national identity cards must list.

Neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit apostasy from Islam, nor do they outlaw efforts to proselytize. The law states individuals may change their religion. The government recognizes conversion to Islam, but generally does not recognize conversions from Islam to any other religion, except in the case of individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam, according to a Ministry of Interior decree pursuant to a court order. Reverting to Christianity requires presentation of a document from the receiving church, an identity card, and fingerprints. After a determination is made that the intent of the change – which often also entails a name change – is not to evade prosecution for a crime committed under the Muslim name, a new identity document is issued with the Christian name and religious designation. In cases in which Muslims not born Muslim convert from Islam, their minor children, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, remain classified as Muslims. When these children reach the age of 18, they have the option of converting to Christianity and having that reflected on their identity cards.

The penal code, while not addressing blasphemy by name, states that “disdaining and disrespecting” any of the “heavenly religions” (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) is punishable by six months’ to five years’ imprisonment or fines of at least 500 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (\$20). Using religion to promote “extremist ideology” with the aim of inciting strife or contempt of the “heavenly religions” or their sects or harming national unity carries penalties ranging from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment. The law is commonly applied in cases alleging contempt of Sunni Islam and Christianity. The cybercrime law penalizes “violating the family principles of Egyptian Society” with a minimum imprisonment of six months and a fine of 50,000-100,000 EGP (\$2,000-4,000). According to civil society organizations, the term “family principles” is vague and is often invoked to punish perceived blasphemy.

There are four entities currently authorized to issue fatwas (religious rulings binding on Muslims): the al-Azhar Council of Senior Scholars, the al-Azhar Islamic Research Academy, Dar al-Iftaa (House of Religious Edicts), and the Ministry of Awqaf’s General Fatwa Directorate.

While a part of the Ministry of Justice, Dar al-Iftaa has been an independent organization since 2007.

Islamic, Christian, and Jewish groups may request official recognition from the government, which gives previously unrecognized religious groups the right to be governed by their own canonical laws, practice religious rituals, establish houses of worship, and import religious literature. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the Ministry of the Interior's Administrative Affairs Department. The department then determines whether the group poses a threat to national unity or social peace. As part of this determination, the department consults leading religious institutions, including the Coptic Orthodox Church and al-Azhar. The President then reviews and adjudicates the registration application.

The law does not recognize the Baha'i Faith or its religious laws and bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. The law does not stipulate penalties for banned religious groups or their members who engage in religious practices, but these groups are denied rights granted to recognized groups, such as having their own houses of worship or other property, holding bank accounts, or importing religious literature.

The government, through the Ministry of Awqaf, appoints, pays the salaries of, and monitors imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques. According to the law, penalties for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from the Ministry of Awqaf or al-Azhar include a prison term of up to one year, a fine of up to 50,000 EGP (\$2,000), or both. The penalty doubles for repeat offenders. Ministry of Awqaf inspectors also have judicial authority to arrest imams for violating this law. A ministry decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters (860 square feet), bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services (other prayer services are permitted), and pays bonuses to imams who deliver Friday sermons written and disseminated by the Ministry of Awqaf. Ministry personnel monitor Friday sermons in major mosques and an imam who fails to follow the guidelines for ministry sermons may lose the bonus and be subject to disciplinary measures, including potentially losing his preaching license.

The Prime Minister has the authority to stop circulation of books that "denigrate religions," referring to the three recognized Abrahamic faiths. Ministries may obtain court orders to ban or confiscate books and works of art. The cabinet may ban works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research

Academy of al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and confiscate any publications dealing with the Quran and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*sunnah*) and to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law.

A 2016 law delegates the power to issue legal permits and to authorize church construction or renovation to governors of the country's 27 governorates. The governor must respond within four months of receipt of an application for legalization; any refusal must include a written justification. The law does not provide for review or appeal of a refusal, nor does it specify recourse if a governor fails to respond within the required timeframe. The law also includes provisions to legalize existing unlicensed churches. It stipulates that while a request to license an existing building for use as a church is pending, the use of the building to conduct church services and rites may not be prevented. Under the law, the size of new churches continues to depend on a government determination of the "number and need" of Christians in the area. Construction of new churches must meet specific land registration procedures and building codes and is subject by law to greater government regulation than that applied to the construction of new mosques.

Under a separate law governing the construction of mosques, the Ministry of Awqaf reviews and approves building permits. A 2001 cabinet decree includes a list of 10 provisions requiring that new mosques built after that date must, among other conditions, be a minimum of 500 meters (1,640 feet) from the nearest other mosque, have a ground surface of at least 175 square meters (1,884 square feet), and be built only in areas where "the existing mosques do not accommodate the number of residents in the area." The law does not require Ministry of Awqaf approval for mosque renovations.

In both public and private schools that teach the national curriculum, in all grades Muslim students are required to take courses on "principles of Islam" and Christian students are required to take courses on "principles of Christianity." The religious studies courses they take are based on their official identity card designations, not personal or parental decisions. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other once selected. A common set of textbooks for these two courses is mandated for both public and private schools, including parochial schools. Al-Azhar maintains a separate school system that serves an estimated two million students from kindergarten through secondary school, using its own curriculum.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion and defines it as including "any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to...

religion or belief.” The law applies to religions “whose rituals are publicly held,” which technically applies only to the three Abrahamic religions. The law stipulates imprisonment for a term determined by the judge, a fine of no less than 30,000 EGP (\$1,200) and no more than 50,000 EGP (\$2,000), or both as penalties for discrimination. If the perpetrator is a government employee, the law states that the imprisonment should be no less than three months and the fine no less than 50,000 EGP (\$2,000) and no more than 100,000 EGP (\$4,000).

Customary reconciliation is a form of dispute resolution that predates the country’s modern judicial and legal systems and is recognized in the law in instances that do not pertain to crimes considered more serious (e.g., those involving homicide, significant injury, or theft). Customary reconciliation sessions rely on the accumulation of a set of customary rules to address conflicts between individuals, families, households, or workers and employees in certain professions. Parties to disputes agree upon a resolution that typically contains stipulations to pay an agreed-upon amount of money for breaching the terms of the agreement.

In matters of family law, when spouses are members of the same religious denomination, courts apply that denomination’s canonical laws. The courts apply sharia in cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other is a member of a different religion, where both are Christians but members of different denominations, or where the individuals are not members of a government-recognized religious group.

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim citizens, with documentation from a cleric, and does not recognize civil marriages between Egyptian citizens. Marriages between Shia are recognized as Muslim marriages. The law stipulates Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslim men who wish to marry Muslim women must convert to Islam. Christian and Jewish women are not required to convert to Islam to marry Muslim men. A married non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert to Islam. If a married man is discovered to have left Islam, his marriage to a woman whose official religious designation is Muslim is dissolved.

A divorced mother is entitled to custody of her son until the age of 15 and her daughter until the daughter marries. The children’s father has the right to petition the court to ask the children to choose between staying with their mother or father, unless one parent is Muslim and the other is not, in which case the Muslim parent is awarded custody.

The government recognizes civil marriages of Baha'is, as well as of individuals from other unrecognized religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, if one or both are foreigners. Authorities deny Baha'is the rights of married couples pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse. In practice, however, Baha'is reported occasional success in filing individual petitions for recognition of their marriages in civil court.

The law generally follows sharia in matters of inheritance. In 2017, an appellate court ruled that applying sharia to non-Muslims in inheritance matters violated the section of the constitution stating that personal status matters for Christian and Jewish communities are governed by their respective religious doctrines. The Constitutional Court has not ruled on this issue.

Sharia provisions forbidding adoption apply to all citizens. The Ministry of Social Solidarity, however, manages a program called "Alternative Family" which recognizes permanent legal guardianship if certain conditions are met, including requirements that the guardians share the same religion as the child and have been married to one another for a minimum of five years.

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

The constitution mandates that the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission, to be established by parliament; parliament has not established such a commission.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The newspaper *al-Wafd* reported that in September, the Second Circuit Terrorism Court in Tora sentenced an unnamed individual to 14 years in prison in a retrial for the 2013 mob

killing of Shia scholar Hassan Shehata and three of Shehata's followers, including his brother. The original trial was invalidated on a technicality.

In May, the Emergency State Security Criminal Court sentenced Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, leader of the Strong Egypt Party, a former presidential candidate and a former leader within the Muslim Brotherhood, to 15 years in prison for "funding a terrorist organization."

On June 23, the human rights advocacy NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) issued a statement warning of the imminent forced deportation that month of Yemeni asylum seeker Abdul-Baqi Saeed Abdo, although according to local human rights advocates, at year's end, he remained in Egypt. In 2015, the NCHR registered Saeed, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity in 2013 before moving to Egypt, as an asylum applicant. Egyptian authorities arrested him in December 2021 and accused him of "joining a terrorist group" and "contempt for Islam." EIPR said the state, as a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, had a duty not to deport Saeed to Yemen where his life or freedom would be threatened due to his religion.

According to a July 4 *al-Manassa* article, in February, Ministry of Interior officials pardoned five police officers who were originally sentenced to prison terms of three years each for torturing Coptic merchant Magdy Makin to death in a Cairo police station in 2016. According to the article, at the time of the pardons, the five had only served one year of their sentences and the police force later reinstated one of the pardoned officers. The pardons came in the wake of a broader presidential pardon issued on the anniversary of the country's 2011 revolution.

According to media reports, on June 6, the Emergency State Security Court in Heliopolis acquitted lawyer and Islamic researcher Ahmed Abdo Maher of contempt of Islam and inciting sectarian strife. In 2021, the Nozha Misdemeanor Court found Maher guilty of contempt of Islam and sentenced him to five years in prison with hard labor, but the Office of Ratification of Emergency State Security Provisions ordered a retrial before a new court after his attorneys appealed the original verdict. The original prosecutor charged Maher based on statements he made in his book *How the Imams' Jurisprudence Is Leading the Nation Astray*. Activists and NGOs in 2021 responded to the case by calling for the abolition of the country's blasphemy law.

According to EIPR, Cairo's Economic Court, a circuit court that handles prosecutions brought under the country's cybercrime law, sentenced Marco Gerges Salib to five years in prison on January 29 for "exploitation of religion to promote extremist ideas, contempt for Islam, and infringement on Egyptian family values." Authorities arrested Gerges, a Copt, in 2021 for

allegedly storing pornographic photographs deemed offensive to Islam on his mobile phone and comments about religion exchanged in private text messages. The defense stressed that no pictures or comments were posted to the internet and argued the basis for the investigation was an illegal search. On September 12, the Cairo Economic Court rejected his petition to appeal the verdict to the Supreme Constitutional Court. In a statement released on February 1, EIPR said the ruling relied on “vague and unconstitutional accusations, including the charge of contempt of religion contained in the penal code, and attacking the values of the Egyptian family and society contained in the Law on Combating Information Technology Crimes, which opens the way wide for the misuse of these accusations in violating the freedoms of opinion, expression, creativity, and belief.” According to the rights group defending Gerges, there was little relationship between the charges and the evidence presented against him.

According to secular news websites, in November, national security authorities summoned YouTube content creator and self-professed atheist Hesham al-Masry for questioning after Ahmad Karima, professor of Islamic law and comparative jurisprudence at al-Azhar University, accused him of insulting Islam following a heated online debate between Karima and al-Masry, during which al-Masry criticized Islamic doctrine and the Prophet Muhammad. Authorities released al-Masry without charge in November.

EIPR reported that on February 10, the Court of Cassation (the highest tier in the country's common court system) rejected the EIPR's appeal on behalf of self-professed atheist activist and blogger Anas Hassan of a 2020 Amreya court's verdict sentencing him to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 EGP (\$12,100) for managing “The Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page. Authorities originally arrested Hassan in 2019, charging him with publishing atheist ideas and criticizing the “divinely revealed religions.” EIPR stated the Court of Cassation's ruling “comes in a broader context of prosecutions and trials for online expression in general, and for various religious expressions in particular. This includes a wide range of pursuits of nontraditional Islamic ideas, such as criticizing some traditional figures valued by Sunni Muslims, or expressing the ideas of non-Sunni Islamic sects such as Shias, Ahmadis, and Quranists, in addition to expressing atheistic ideas or declaring lack of faith and criticizing religions.”

Local, regional, and international press outlets reported that on January 8, authorities released Copt and human rights activist Ramy Kamel Saied Salib (commonly known as Ramy Kamel). Authorities originally arrested Salib in 2019 following his application for a Swiss visa to speak at a UN forum in Geneva on minority rights and charged him with joining a banned

group and spreading false news. Salib had previously presented on issues affecting the Coptic community in the same forum.

The news outlet *Middle East Monitor* reported that in April, authorities released nine Copts who were arrested on January 30 following a peaceful protest in Samalut, Minya Governorate. The nine were among a group of approximately 70 demonstrators who demanded authorization for the construction of a new church to replace one that had burned down in 2016. According to Amnesty International, the original church was the only place of worship in the village of Ezbet Farag Allah for approximately 800 Coptic Christians, who, after the fire, had to travel to surrounding villages to attend religious services. The January demonstrations followed the government's demolition of the remnants of the burned church and subsequent failure to respond to a formal request that the governorate authorize the construction of a new church.

According to an EIPR statement corroborated by photographs posted on social media, on February 23, Zagazig Criminal Court released Quranist activist Reda Abdel Rahman. Authorities detained Abdel Rahman, the nephew of Ahmed Sobhy Mansour, one of the most prominent advocates of Quranism, in 2020 and accused him of being an ISIS member and espousing "*takfiri* thought" (i.e., accusing other Muslims of heresy), although he was never tried. Following his release, authorities stopped Rahman at Cairo International Airport and prevented him from travelling internationally without permission from the National Security Agency.

Al-Jazeera reported that on June 9, Cairo's Criminal Court sentenced Salafi preacher Mahmoud Shaaban to 15 years in prison for "inciting violence, opposing the state, and joining a terrorist group." Authorities charged Shaaban with joining the Free Syrian Army in Syria. Shaaban appeared in a wheelchair during the trial and accused authorities of "willful medical negligence." *Al-Jazeera* reported authorities originally arrested him and three other Salafi preachers in 2019 for their membership in a banned political group, but a court acquitted them in 2021. Authorities rearrested Shaaban shortly after his release following the acquittal.

As reported by Member of Parliament Tarek al-Khouly via a published list of names, on September 9, the Presidential Pardon Committee (reactivated by President Sisi in April) announced the release of YouTube content creators Ahmed Sebaie, a Salafist, and Gergis Samih, a Copt. Both had been in pretrial detention since their separate arrests in 2020 on accusations of "joining a terrorist group, spreading false news to destabilize the country, and using the internet to commit a crime." Authorities arrested Sebaie after he released a

YouTube video criticizing the Bible and Samih after he created a Facebook post that Muslim neighbors called offensive to Islam.

The NGO Association of Freedom of Thought and Expression reported that on October 19, the South Cairo Court prosecutor summoned poet Amina Abdullah and resumed an investigation into whether she had committed contempt of religion and taken God's name in vain during a public reading of her poem "Daughters of Pain." The association said authorities first summoned her on October 16 but released her on October 18 on 5,000 EGP (\$202) bail. Abdullah stated that due to the controversy generated by her poem, she received threats of violence, including threats to disfigure her with acid.

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reported that in June, dean of al-Azhar's Sharia Faculty Mabrouk Attia said women should dress modestly to avoid tempting men. Otherwise, "some slaving man may see you and murder you." Attia's remarks came in the wake of student Naira al-Ashraf's death at the hands of her boyfriend Muhammad Adel when she refused to marry him. Attia's comments sparked sharp backlash on social media and the National Council for Women filed a legal complaint against Attia with the general prosecutor for incitement to murder. Attia said his statements were misinterpreted. Calling al-Ashraf's death "a reprehensible and heinous crime," he said "Not wearing the veil is not justification for murder. I said that the veil protects [women] and decreases the cases [of attacks against them]."

Media reported the Heliopolis public prosecutor launched an investigation of dean Attia for insulting Christianity and Islam after he issued a video in July in which he employed a pun playing on the similarity of the Arabic words for "Mars" and "Messiah." Following complaints from Christians that his comments insulted Jesus, also a revered figure in Islam, Attia publicly apologized. On November 30, a court fined Attia 1,000 EGP (\$40).

On October 25, CNN reported a TikTok content creator using the account name "al-Prince al-Masry" ("Prince of Egypt") issued several videos in which he burned the Bible, smashed a cross using slippers, and insulted Jesus. The public prosecutor's office subsequently announced on Facebook that it had started an investigation, accusing al-Prince al-Masry of "exploiting religion in promoting extremist ideas with the intent of provoking discord and contempt of the heavenly Christian religion and the Christians and harming national unity." His case remained under review at year's end.

In March, a judge in the Second Circuit of the Criminal Court ordered the release of a woman pharmacist after five months in detention, reportedly with precautionary measures

(conditions of release) “to be determined later by the police department.” Police in Zagazig District, Sharqia Governorate, arrested the woman in 2021 and authorities charged her with “spreading false news and joining a banned group” one week after she reported her coworkers for assaulting and harassing her for her decision not to wear a hijab. A video of the assault was widely circulated on Facebook. The Supreme State Security Prosecution initially ordered her detained for 15 days pending an investigation of the charges but extended her detention multiple times.

Media outlet *Cairo24* reported that in June, Naguib Gabriel, attorney and head of the Egyptian Federation for Human Rights, stated he would appeal a then recent ruling – drawing on sharia principles – from the Family Court in Sohag City, Sohag Governorate, that a man’s conversion to Islam from Christianity was not adequate grounds for his wife to seek a divorce. Gabriel, representing the convert’s wife, stated the court’s decision was contrary to guarantees in the Coptic Orthodox Church’s bylaws that permit Christians to seek divorce if their spouse departs from the Christian religion. He said, “This ruling overturned all established principles in the judiciary, according to which a Christian wife has the right to apply her religion’s law, and this ruling means that a Christian wife is forced to live with her husband, who has departed from her religion.”

In September, social media activists circulated a photograph depicting a certificate of conversion to Islam issued by al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Academy on behalf of a young Christian, Saad Fahim, from a village in Beni Suef Governorate. They also circulated a medical certificate for the same man from a hospital in Beni Suef that indicated Fahim suffered from a “psychological disorder and a delay in mental abilities” and had previously been committed to the hospital for psychological treatment. The activists questioned how al-Azhar could accept such a conversion, and whether it was an indicator of “forced conversion campaigns.”

On August 15, the South Cairo Criminal Court ruled that the Muslim Brotherhood, originally designated as a proscribed terrorist entity in 2013, should be redesignated for five more years. The court also redesignated 277 of its members as terrorists for three more years. The court ruled the 277 persons appearing on the list could immediately return to government jobs from which they had been suspended as a consequence of their inclusion on the list, in addition to receiving their full wages; they had previously received half wages in connection with their suspension from work. The individuals on the list remained barred from international travel. A source familiar with the court told *al-Shorouk* the court made its determination on the grounds that the defendants had the right to earn a living.

In August, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy published an article by an academic on ministering to Christians in the country's prisons. The academic said prison authorities controlled what written or visual materials religious workers shared with inmates. Guards reportedly did not always recognize the diversity of Christian denominations, asking a Coptic layperson "are you not all the same?" The academic also suggested that nonbelieving Coptic prisoners felt compelled to attend meetings with religious counselors, lest their absence imply atheism, making them "more vulnerable to violence by jailers and prisoners."

In January, *al Jazeera* reported the Ministry of Awqaf's decision on December 29, 2021 to limit the duration of Friday sermons to 10 minutes as a COVID-19 prevention measure sparked widespread criticism on social media. The ministry said preachers and imams who violated the rule would face disciplinary measures, including having their licenses revoked. In a statement released on May 6, Minister of Awqaf Mohammad Mokhtar Gomaa announced that Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly had approved the full reopening of mosques and shrines, lifting most previous COVID-19 restrictions. Under the new guidance, mosques resumed normal operations starting May 8, allowing the return of religious and Quran recitation lessons. Islamic shrines were also opened during nonprayer times. The announcement appealed to worshipers to continue to wear masks and practice social distancing, adding that the duration of Friday sermons would continue to be capped at 10 minutes. The government had lifted COVID-19 restrictions on church gatherings, although many churches imposed their own restrictions on gatherings during outbreaks.

Media outlet *Orient.net* reported that in July, Dar al-Iftaa issued a fatwa saying Muslims kissing and touching shrines or requesting help from the shrines' patrons (i.e., prophets, saints, and righteous people), whether dead or alive, did not contradict monotheism or imply nonbelief in Islam. Thousands of social media users criticized the fatwa, stating that the veneration of shrines and their patrons was associated with Shiism or idolatry.

Media outlet *Arabi21* reported that in October, the Ministry of Awqaf arrested the imam of Cairo's Abul Ella Mosque pending an investigation after a video clip circulated of individuals dancing and singing inside the mosque on the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The video sparked public anger, with some considering the festivities disrespectful.

The news outlet *Al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that in October, authorities canceled several Sufi celebrations, including the commemoration of the birth of 13th-century cleric Sayyid al-Badawi in Gharbia Governorate and a parade procession for the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, describing the cancellations as precautionary measures against COVID-19.

In May, *al-Jumhuriya Online* reported Minister of Awqaf Gomaa met with Sheikh Abd al-Hadi al-Qasabi, leader of the Sufi orders. The two agreed that any Sufi religious observances or celebrations should be approved via an exchange of official letters between the General Sheikhdом headed by al-Qasabi and the Awqaf ministry.

In November, thousands of Sufi adherents in Cairo celebrated the birth of Imam al-Hussein in Cairo's al-Gamaleya neighborhood near the al-Hussein Mosque. The government reportedly did not issue a permit for the celebration but made no attempt to halt it.

According to the media outlet *Youm7*, in October, followers of the 13th-century Sufi imam Sidi Ibrahim al-Desouqi gathered in the city of Desouq in Kafr al-Sheikh Governorate to commemorate his birthday near his eponymous mosque. Following evening prayer on October 21, authorities, citing a desire to limit crowd size as a public health measure against COVID-19, closed the mosque, with the exception of allowing visits to Desouqi's shrine inside. The celebration continued a few days later, with smaller numbers in attendance, including Kafr al-Sheikh governor Jama Nour al-Din.

According to multiple local sources, the government largely continued to allow Baha'is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Shia Muslims to worship privately in small numbers, but it continued to deny requests for public religious gatherings by unregistered religious groups.

The NGO Human Rights without Frontiers reported that in January, the African Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses filed a joint submission to the UN Human Rights Committee seeking reregistration in Egypt. The petitioners said unfounded accusations that the group was "Zionist" led the government to deregister it in 1960. The petitioners stated, "The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is entirely religious and does not advocate any political arrangement, which would include Zionism." The inability to register meant Jehovah's Witnesses could not build houses of worship or obtain land to bury their dead, necessitating that they worship "discreetly" in private homes and use privately owned cemeteries. The two associations stated that in 2019, the High Administrative Court rejected the group's appeal of a Ministry of Justice decree preventing Jehovah's Witnesses from officially registering marriages or property ownership in the name of the group. According to the petitioners, the court stated that the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses contradicted the country's public order and morals. The petitioners said, "Currently, the National Security Agency unlawfully interrogates and verbally harasses

Witnesses on a monthly basis, summoning them without official authorization on the pretext of protecting national interests.”

Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo, which members of the Baha’i community described as overcrowded and inconveniently distant for Baha’is living outside Cairo, remained the only cemetery in the country where Baha’is could be buried. Baha’is continued to pursue legal action to have the government designate a cemetery for persons whose national identity cards showed a dash [“-”] under religious affiliation (i.e., all those whom the government considered not to be Muslim, Christian, or Jewish). In December, the Supreme Administrative Court, responding to an appeal by the Baha’i community to a previous lower court decision in March, ruled that the government of Alexandria was not obligated to grant land for a cemetery for members of unrecognized religious groups. In the earlier ruling, Alexandria’s Administrative Court cited the religious opinion of al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Academy, which stated that allocating land for a Baha’i cemetery would “lead to discrimination, further division, fragmentation, and rupture of the fabric of...society.” Also in December, the Port Said Administrative Court rejected a petition by members of the Baha’i community to allocate land for a cemetery there. In May, television commentator Ibrahim Eissa called on President Sisi to intervene to solve the Baha’i cemetery crisis, stating the group suffered from being unable to obtain burial permits outside of the Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo. Eissa added, “They are Egyptians.... It is their right to be buried in their land,” and suggested the issue was relevant to the freedom of belief that President Sisi advocated.

One member of the Shia community said the government scheduled repairs and refurbishment of shrines venerated by Shias (e.g., Cairo’s al-Hussein Mosque) as an excuse to prevent gatherings of Shia pilgrims during Ashura and other observances.

Local media reported that on January 7, Wadi al-Natrun Correctional and Rehabilitation Center allowed several members of clergy to enter the facility to perform prayers for Christian prisoners for Coptic Christmas.

Reverend Samuel Abdullah stated on Facebook that on May 20, for the first time since its establishment, the Air Force Academy in Bilbeis, Sharqia Governorate, held a Christian religious service. The service, which took place in a newly constructed church opened earlier that month, included students and leaders from the academy.

In May, then Minister of Local Development Mahmoud Shaarawy announced that the 25 stops on the 2,100-mile Holy Family Trail, marking the route Christians believe was taken by Mary, Joseph, and Jesus from Israel to Egypt, were almost ready to receive visitors. In

September, following months of renovation, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities reopened a pilgrimage site on the trail in Cairo's Matariya District believed to contain a sycamore tree descended from the one under which Mary reputedly bathed the infant Jesus during the trio's journey. On January 11, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities announced a special six-month museum exhibition in Sharm al-Sheikh on the history of the Holy Family in Egypt, consisting of manuscripts, icons, and other exhibits.

The Ministry of Awqaf continued to distribute sermon guidelines monthly to Sunni mosques and to recommend imams adhere to prescribed themes. It did not, however, dictate content word for word. According to the country's *National Counterterrorism Report* released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September, the Ministry of Awqaf played "a crucial role in countering extremist ideology and reforming religious discourse" and had "taken measures to ensure preachers who deliver Friday sermons are well-versed and trained to perform that crucial role." The report stated the ministry "dismisses those who have been convicted in cases of sabotage, corruption, or terrorism, preventing them from preaching again. These measures aim to prevent terrorists and unqualified individuals from abusing mosques in promoting extremist ideology." The report identified as "preventive measures" degrading the capability of the "terrorist Muslim Brotherhood and other terrorist organizations," coordinating with national authorities and religious institutions to refute extremist ideologies, promoting moderate religious teachings, and thwarting terrorist organizations' efforts to recruit new followers.

The *National Counterterrorism Report* stated al-Azhar's Observatory for Combating Extremism played "a significant role in monitoring and analyzing manifestations of extremism and discrediting extremist ideology." It circulated its publications in more than a dozen languages, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, and Farsi, and organized sensitization and awareness-raising campaigns to "promote the true essence of religion and refute extremist ideology." In addition to monitoring, the observatory's staff of approximately 100 individuals offered counterarguments to extremist statements on jihadi websites.

According to the *National Counterterrorism Report*, the government aimed at preventing terrorism by "monitoring extremist groups' inflammatory pages and websites, identifying those in charge of their management, and taking legal action against them." The report cited a 2015 law criminalizing the promotion and glorification of terrorist crimes as the basis for defining extremist groups. According to EIPR, despite the language in the counterterrorism report, the government blocked but did not take legal action against websites that it deemed inflammatory.

Pro-Muslim Brotherhood media outlets reported that following the death of Qatar-based Sunni cleric and spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Youssef al-Qaradawi in September, the Ministry of Awqaf banned prayers and sermons in mosques mentioning Qaradawi. Qaradawi went into self-imposed exile in Qatar in 2013 following the overthrow of then President Mohammed Morsi, and Egyptian authorities sentenced him to death in absentia in 2015. On September 26, journalist and political commentator Muhammad al-Daysati posted to Twitter, "Yousef al-Qaradawi was the mufti of terrorism and he distorted Islam and created strife in Syria, Palestine, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia and made Muslims kill Muslims so that the Muslim Brotherhood could rule."

Youm7 reported that in August, the Disciplinary Court of the Supreme Administration of the State Council sanctioned Sabry Ebada, the former undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf in Ismailia Governorate, with an official warning for violations including speaking in "an inappropriate manner" before worshipers in the mosque, and "exceeding the prescribed length for the sermon." The ministry dismissed the undersecretary in 2021 after he delivered a Friday sermon at the al-Matafy Mosque in which he described some of the worshipers as extremists, leading to an altercation between himself and worshipers following his address.

Al-Masrawy reported that in October, the Awqaf ministry's office in Beni Suef Governorate transferred a preacher at the Hajja Fatima Mosque near Beni Suef City and garnished his wages for violating the ministry's prescribed dress code. Worshipers had complained the preacher wore a shirt and pants instead of traditional *gilbab* robes while carrying out his official mosque duties.

Shia activist Haidar Kandil, a former reporter for the daily newspaper *al-Dustour*, continued to say he experienced travel restrictions and difficulties in finding work, which he attributed to religious discrimination. According to Kandil, in 2021, authorities banned him from travelling to Moscow and required him to check in weekly with police in his hometown, Tanta City. He said officials accused him of contempt of religion, spreading Shiism and antistate ideas, and establishing a group in violation of the law.

Media reported that on March 21, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected the appeal filed by the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) against an administrative court's 2020 ruling that obligated the NTRA to block Shia websites in general, and the *Ibn al-Nafis* news website in particular, from the internet. The NTRA had argued monitoring content of websites was outside the scope of its mandate to provide access to web services.

According to a contributor at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, an international NGO focused on human rights, the government continued to ban the importation and sale of Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses literature and authorized customs officials to confiscate religious materials from these groups' adherents.

Organizers of the state-sponsored annual Cairo International Book Fair, held January 26-February 7, banned some publishing houses from participating and expelled others. For the second consecutive year, Palestinian writer and publisher Bisan Adwan was absent from the fair. Authorities expelled Adwan – who had resided in Egypt since childhood – from the country in 2020 amid accusations in the progovernment press that she promoted atheism. For the first time, organizers banned Egyptian publishing house Book Juice from participating due to what head of the Egyptian Publishers Association Saeed Abdo said were accusations that Book Juice had links to the Muslim Brotherhood. Book fair management reportedly rejected the Asir al-Kutub publishing house's participation without a justification, according to the firm. The decision followed allegations in the media that the firm published some books and publications authored by Islamists. Company officials told the *Cairo24* website they had reviewed all their religious heritage publications to ensure that they were free of any ideas that support religious extremism and removed a large number of books from the firm's electronic platform. The fair included publishers from various Arab countries and hosted approximately 91,000 visitors.

Multiple local and international sources reported that as of year's end, the case against EIPR researcher Patrick George Zaki on charges of "spreading false news" remained ongoing. The charges stemmed from a 2019 article Zaki wrote on anti-Coptic discrimination. In December 2021, the court ordered Zaki released on bail after 22 months in pretrial detention but prohibited him from travelling abroad. On November 29, the court set February 2023 for Zaki's next hearing.

Some publishers reported they were wary of publishing books that criticized religious institutions such as al-Azhar or challenged Islamic doctrine.

In November, the State Information Service announced that a cabinet committee tasked with registering unlicensed churches approved the adjusted status of 125 churches and affiliated buildings which were already built, bringing the total number of churches and service buildings granted legal status since 2017 to 2,526 out of 3,730 requests sent to the committee, with the remaining 1,204 pending at year's end. There were no reports that the committee had rejected any requests to adjust the status of unlicensed churches. The

committee stated representatives of Christian denominations would be invited to attend its next meeting to discuss ways for recently legalized churches to conform to building codes and fire safety standards. In March, President Sisi publicly called for building churches in every new municipality. While some non-Coptic Orthodox groups said the approval process took longer than normal, Coptic leaders said they were satisfied with the pace of committee approvals and that they expected to see decreasing numbers of approvals for previously unlicensed churches in the future as the government addressed the pre-2017 backlog.

In August, local and international media outlets reported on a series of fires inside churches and public places around the country, including an August 13 fire in the Abu Sefein Church in the Giza suburbs of Cairo that killed 41 persons. According to some sources, authorities suspected arson in only one case, a minor fire in Alexandria in which a person allegedly threw lighted cigarettes at a church. Police made no arrests in that case. Some clerical personnel and laypersons said the government bore partial responsibility for the church fires because its pre-2016 legacy of blocking church renovations and registrations led to overcrowded buildings in crowded urban areas with dangerous or poorly maintained electrical wiring.

In August, an unnamed Coptic parliamentarian told the news outlet *New Arab* the government and the Coptic Orthodox Church went through a “muffled crisis” over church properties located within areas and projects that the government had prioritized for economic development. The parliamentarian said the government offered the Coptic Orthodox Church new land in exchange for its current holdings. Other sources said the government and the church cooperated and the government did not force the church to exchange properties.

Al-Bawabh News reported that in August, President Sisi issued a decree allocating an area of approximately 12 acres of state-owned land in the Qus District, Qena Governorate, to establish a church for Coptic Catholics.

On April 27, President Sisi and the Sultan of the Indian Bohra community, Mufaddal Saifuddin, presided over the reopening of the al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo after extensive renovations. Sisi hailed the Bohra community's contributions to renovating the mosque.

In May, the Ministry of Awqaf announced the state had constructed, developed, or maintained more than 8,500 Sunni mosques since President Sisi came to power in 2014. In June, Minister Gomaa said that since 2014, the ministry had spent nine billion EGP (\$363.7 million) to renovate approximately 9,000 mosques nationwide. In October, the ministry announced that during the year, it had funded construction of 260 new mosques. Gomaa said

the ministry paid more than 2.1 billion EGP (\$84.8 million) toward social programs, including 200 million EGP (\$8 million) toward Islamic education and school construction.

Shia community sources and religious freedom observers again said information contained in a 2019 report by Minority Rights Group International, an international NGO, on challenges facing the country's Shia community remained valid. The NGO's report stated that there continued to be no Shia congregational halls (*housseiniyas*) in the country and Shia Muslims remained unable to establish public places of worship.

In July, the Ministry of Awqaf called on citizens to report via WhatsApp any mosque, other than those belonging to Sufi orders, that maintained collection boxes, and stressed the need for all Awqaf directorates, departments, and inspectors to ensure that there were no collection boxes in mosques. The ministry banned the use of collection boxes in mosques in 2021, citing security and transparency concerns, but made an exception for Sufi orders, whose collection boxes worshipers used for donations when they believed God had answered a prayer.

In April, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities began restoring the historic Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, a nonworking synagogue that functioned as a museum and tourist attraction.

In early October, human rights activists circulated on social media a list of 50 students, all Copts, whom administrators reportedly assigned to a single class at a public school in Damanhour. The activists stated the all-Copt class was a sign of discrimination and that students of different faiths should be mixed in public school classrooms. Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of Education issued a statement that the special class was a trial to facilitate Christians' attendance in religious education classes, but that the plan had since been abandoned and both Muslim and Christian students were now attending classes together.

Youm7 reported the Ministry of Education continued to develop a new curriculum that included increased coverage of respect for human rights and religious tolerance. In June, Minister of Education Reda Hegazy announced the curriculum for grades four through six would include grade-appropriate versions of the book *Values and Respect for Others*, an ethics text drawn from Islamic and Christian religious traditions. The book was already in use in classes in the first through third grades, and, according to *Youm7*, dealt with "human values common to all religions, such as honesty, cleanliness, acceptance of others, respect for diversity, tolerance, etc." In October, Minister Hegazy announced the ministry had revised the primary school curriculum to focus on four priorities, including "learning to coexist with

others.” Contrary to remarks Hegazy reportedly made in parliament when he was Deputy Minister of Education in 2021, the government did not issue instructions to remove Quranic verses from the general curriculum and restrict them to religious classes.

In April, the Ministry of Education amended the schedule of exams for primary and secondary school students when made aware that the dates originally announced coincided with Palm Sunday and Easter.

In December, MEMRI reported the Ministry of Education launched an investigation after photographs circulated on social media of junior high school girls in a village in Dakahlia Governorate wearing head-to-toe coverings as the school uniform. *Al Arab* said the school had imposed the dress code for seven years. Critics likened the school to “Taliban schools” and said it was “an act of child abuse.” Supporters of the school criticized “the secular media attack on the hijab” and called the photographs of girls in the prescribed uniforms “a heartening Islamic sight...that every devout believer should strictly follow.”

Reuters reported that on September 13, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a decision to remove Mona Prince from her position as an instructor at state-run Suez University. The court justified the decision by saying Prince departed from the approved curriculum and did not adhere to accepted religious dogma while teaching *Paradise Lost* by John Milton; it also criticized her for posting a video on her personal Facebook page of herself dancing. The court condemned her instruction methods as “deviating from the scientific description of the academic curricula and spreading ideas that contradict heavenly beliefs and public order.”

The Personal Status Law, coving all citizens regardless of religion, remained in place. At year’s end, the cabinet had still not submitted to the House of Representatives the draft Personal Status Law for Christians that media reported the Ministry of Justice completed in late 2021; Christian representatives from multiple denominations had reviewed and agreed to the ministry’s draft. Several parliamentarians said the cabinet might submit the Personal Status Law for Christians once a new Personal Status Law for Muslims had been drafted and submitted. President Sisi created a drafting committee for the latter legislation in June and reviewed the committee’s progress in December, but as of year’s end the draft was not complete.

In September, the Coptic news website *al-Watani* reported that in February, authorities removed a four-year-old child, a foundling, from the adoptive Coptic family who were raising him and sent him to an orphanage. Police and Ministry of Social Solidarity officials based the decision to remove the child on the law stating that a child of unknown biological parentage is

assumed to be Muslim, which rendered his upbringing in a Christian household potentially illegal. Upon transferring the child to the orphanage, authorities changed his name from the Christian one the adoptive Coptic family had given him to one that could be Christian or Muslim. The family challenged the decision to remove the child in administrative court. The court postponed the case until March 2023.

While the Coptic Orthodox Church did not bar participation in government-sponsored customary reconciliation sessions, a church spokesperson said reconciliation sessions should not be used in lieu of the application of the law and should be restricted to “clearing the air and making amends” following sectarian disputes or violence. At least one Coptic Orthodox diocese in Upper Egypt continued to refuse to participate in reconciliation sessions, criticizing them as substitutes for criminal proceedings rather than a means of addressing attacks on Christians and their churches. Other Christian denominations reported they continued to participate in customary reconciliation sessions.

Human rights groups and some Christian community representatives continued to characterize reconciliation sessions as encroaching on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship and said mediators regularly pressured Christian participants to retract their statements and deny facts, leading in some cases to the dropping of criminal charges. Local media reported that in April, Nevine Sobhy, a Christian, reported to local police in Menoufiya Governorate that a pharmacist slapped her twice for not wearing the hijab while visiting his drugstore during Ramadan. Sobhy complained on social media that police then pressured her to resort to customary reconciliation and only allowed her to file an official complaint when she insisted. After 10 days, a customary reconciliation session led by “security figures,” in the presence of the village’s mayor and its church’s priest, concluded with the pharmacist paying Sobhy 100,000 EGP (\$4,000) on the condition that Sobhy withdraw her police complaint. According to local media, based on a study of 45 customary reconciliation cases, EIPR found a persistent trend among reconciliation councils to favor the more socially empowered stakeholder. According to EIPR analysis, customary reconciliation “is seen as one of the most important reasons for the recurrence of sectarian tensions, as it establishes the absence of justice and support for the perpetrators, and the lack of reparation for the victims.”

On February 10, the NGO Coptic Solidarity said there was a “2 percent glass ceiling” on Copts in entry-level positions in the judiciary, military and police, and diplomatic corps. The group said, “Additionally, Copts are strictly prohibited from entering any of the ‘sensitive’ government branches (such as the various security and intelligence services as well as the presidential office).” Coptic Solidarity reported that on February 5, President Sisi issued a

decree regarding 1,167 transfers and promotions of judges and prosecutors. Only 20 (1.7 percent) were Copts. The NGO said that only three of the country's approximately 165 ambassadors were Copts.

On February 8, President Sisi appointed Judge Boulos, a Copt, to head the Supreme Constitutional Court, the first Christian so appointed. The Coptic community applauded the announcement and the NCHR released a statement praising the move as signaling a new era of promoting equal opportunities without discrimination for all citizens.

Christians continued to report that those admitted at entry levels of government faced limited opportunities for promotion to the upper ranks. In August, *al-Watan News* reported Minister of Military Production Mohamed Salah El Din appointed Emil Helmy Elias, a Copt, as deputy to the chairman of the National Organization for Military Production. Elias was the first Christian appointed to the position.

No Christians served as presidents of the country's 27 public universities. The government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers, stating as its reason that the curriculum involved study of the Quran. In February, Coptic Solidarity said Copts occupied less than 5 percent of the 1,550 leadership positions in public universities, despite representing 25 to 30 percent of total students.

Minister of Immigration and Expatriate Affairs Soha Samir Gendi was the only Christian in a cabinet of 32 ministers, replacing previous Minister Nabila Makram, also a Christian. Among the 27 governorates, only Damietta and Ismailia had Christian governors. The governor of Damietta was the country's first woman Christian governor. Electoral laws reserve 24 seats for Christian candidates in the House of Representatives. During the year, the House of Representatives exceeded the quota, with 31 Christians out of a total of 596 representatives. There were 24 Christian senators – 17 elected and seven appointed by President Sisi – out of 300 seats in that chamber, including the deputy speaker.

Al-Watani reported that in May, governor of North Sinai Mohamed Abdel-Fadil Shousha ordered that 200 Copts displaced by threat of terrorist violence from the city of Arish in 2017 should be officially assigned to government jobs in their current locations. The decision meant a substantial pay cut for the relocated Copts, since wages and benefits in Arish are higher than in other parts of the country. Following criticism of the decision from the affected employees, the governorate announced in June that the displaced Copts could continue to earn the same salaries they received while working in Arish, provided they presented periodic documentation of their current work status outside of Arish. The Arish Copts expressed relief

at the governor's decision and appreciation for the government's efforts in its war against terrorism in North Sinai Governorate.

Some Shia stated they were excluded from service in the armed services, and from employment in the security and intelligence services. One Shia community member expressed dissatisfaction that al-Azhar continued to ban education on Shia Islam in schools, requiring Shia students to study Sunni Islam.

The government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country. Sources continued to report, however, that authorities denied some religious workers visas or refused them entry upon arrival without explanation. In May, several groups of U.S. citizens, at least 25 persons in all, stated they had been barred from reentering Egypt due to their religious beliefs because the government believed they intended to engage in proselytizing.

Baha'is said courts inconsistently applied rules related to recognition of non-Abrahamic marriage, resulting in judges failing to recognize Baha'i marriages. Members of the community reported that the government targeted members whose marriages the state formally recognized with appeals seeking to overturn that recognition. They also cited several examples during the year of the government refusing to renew the residency visas of foreign-born spouses of Baha'is.

The news outlet *Awaz – The Voice* reported in November that Mufti Ahmed Karima, professor of Comparative Jurisprudence and Islamic Law at al-Azhar University, issued a fatwa that a wife was not required to serve her husband at home, although he said this was "virtuous behavior and the strength of marriage in Islam." Karima added that according to jurisprudence, husbands must also help their wives. According to international media, his statement "caused a stir on social media and kicked off a debate" about women's rights in Islam.

On February 7, Mufti Karima said during an interview on the television station Channel 1 that Islam permitted wife beating as a "discipline method" "for a rebellious wife, who oversteps boundaries set by Allah," although it was "neither a mandatory duty nor a recommended action." Following backlash on social media, the Jurisprudence Research Committee of the Islamic Research Academy in al-Azhar University issued a statement saying al-Azhar did not oppose legislation criminalizing domestic violence and that Islam generally opposes violence "unless in very specific cases."

Youm7 reported that on June 12, the Senate's Culture, Tourism, Antiquities, and Information Committee recommended the General Authority for New Urban Communities circulate a memo to tourist resorts on the northern coast and in Ain Sukhna, Suez Governorate, encouraging resort managers to ensure female guests wearing "burkini" swimsuits be permitted to use pools and beaches, "taking into account the personal freedoms guaranteed by the Egyptian constitution." The committee announced its readiness to investigate all complaints from citizens; a representative of the general authority said it did not receive any during the summer season.

Media outlets reported that in June, Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb appointed Riham Salama as the first woman director of al-Azhar's Observatory for Combatting Extremism. On September 19, he appointed Nahla al-Saidi, dean of the al-Azhar College of Islamic Sciences for International Students, as his adviser, making her the first woman appointed to this position in al-Azhar's history.

According to *Akhbar al-Youm*, on June 25, the Administrative Court of the State Council ruled it had no jurisdiction in a lawsuit that Coptic human rights attorneys filed in 2021 seeking removal of the "religion" field from national identity cards.

Members of the Jewish diaspora continued to inquire about the pace of archiving and digitizing historical community records that have been in the government's possession since 2016.

State-run media outlet *al-Ahram* reported that on April 26, President Sisi called for a "national dialogue" to reach common ground on priority issues facing society, including social issues. According to *al-Ahram*, during his remarks on October 25 at the closing session of the Egyptian Economic Conference, President Sisi called on the general coordinator of the national dialogue, Diaa Rashwan, to organize an interfaith conference including Muslims and Christians as well as nonbelievers. Several religious leaders, including Reverend Musa Ibrahim, spokesman of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and Reverend Refaat Fikry, head of the Dialogue Council of the Evangelical Church, welcomed participating in an interfaith dialogue while expressing no definite position on including nonbelievers.

In December, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a one-year implementation report of the National Strategy for Human Rights; the strategy was originally released in 2021. The implementation report contained a section titled "Freedom of Religion and Belief" and cited steps the government had taken since the strategy's publication to advance religious pluralism and freedom. These included working with the Coptic Orthodox Church to "fill the

shortage of Christian religion teachers,” maintaining, renovating, or restoring 1,277 mosques and 2,401 churches (as of April), at a cost of 1.5 billion EGP (\$60,700) and opening seven of 14 sites along the Holy Family Trail.

On June 18, International Day for Combatting Hate Speech, Grand Imam al-Tayyeb called for a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of legislation to combat intolerance and hatred. The Grand Imam conveyed his message via Facebook and Twitter posts in Arabic, English, and Hindi. He stated the commemoration came at a time of rising intolerance and hatred against Muslims as well as mockery of their symbols and religious principles.

According to the state news agency MENA, in August, Grand Mufti Shawki Allam announced that Dar al-Iftaa would launch a mobile application called “Fatwa Pro,” with support for 12 languages, to address audiences outside the country and the Arab world. Allam told MENA that Dar al-Iftaa was one of the first religious institutions in the country to establish a social media presence and the first religious body in the country to establish a TikTok account, which alone logged up to 30 million interactions weekly.

In February, media outlets reported Grand Imam al-Tayyeb told a delegation of Islamic Affairs Ministers and scholars visiting Cairo for the 32nd conference of the Supreme Islamic Affairs Council that he hoped the conference would help spread the concept of citizenship regardless of race, religion, or gender. The meeting also covered cooperation between al-Azhar and the Ministry of Awqaf on training and certifying imams and preachers in the country and around the world and al-Azhar’s role in spreading “the true values of the Islamic religion.”

The news outlet *Mobtada* reported that on February 9, al-Azhar’s Supreme Committee for Reconciliation, in cooperation with the Assiut Governorate, launched the “Together to Eliminate Revenge” initiative with the goal of eliminating communal rivalries and violence through dialogue. At the initiative’s launch event, Assiut Governor Essam Saad affirmed al-Azhar’s role in “resolving conflicts and fanaticism that have suffocated societies and cannot have a place in the new republic.”

MEMRI reported that on December 26, Ministry of Awqaf official Hussein al-Samanoudi wrote in the daily news outlet *al-Ghad* that Jews were “agents of conspiracy, fraud, corruption, and destruction... [and] bloodthirsty instigators of wars, ruin, and devastation.”

According to MEMRI, on February 4, state-owned television station Channel 2 aired a news report about Jewish assimilation that claimed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* outlined a Jewish scheme to establish a “global kingdom” and destroy non-Jewish nations. The Channel 2

report stated Jews failed to integrate into European societies because of “their enmity towards humanity” and “hostile Jewish personality” that formed because they lived in ghettos. It also stated wars and conflicts erupted because of Jewish “schemes.”

On February 15, former Member of Parliament Mostafa al-Feki wrote in *al-Ahram*, “It is better for us not to deny the Holocaust, whose historicity is proven, but [to] use it to condemn the racist and aggressive crimes committed in the present era.... Moreover, sympathy for the tragedy of the Jews in the Second World War will be a point in our favor and will not harm us.... Acknowledging the Holocaust may count in our favor and can be used to inform the enemy that the fact he survived a crime does not [justify] committing the same crime against another people [i.e., the Palestinians].”

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Terrorist groups, including ISIS-SP, continued sporadic attacks on government, civilian, and security targets in the North Sinai Governorate. News websites *Copts United*, *Copts Today*, and *al-Watani* reported that ISIS-SP members shot and killed two Copts – Salama Waheeb Moussa and his son, Hany Salama Waheeb – on August 30 in the Jalbana area of the Sinai, reportedly due to their religious identity. The news outlets stated the killings were evidence that ISIS-SP had shifted operations from the city of al-Arish to Jalbana following Egyptian security forces’ increased operations in North Sinai, Arish, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuwayid. In the wake of Moussa and Waheeb’s killings, Ahmad Salem, executive director of the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights, said, “The murder and enforced disappearance of Christians can only be described, whether by Egyptian legal or constitutional standards or international standards, as murder based on religious identity committed by armed groups against members of a religious community with the aim of disposing of and terrorizing members of said community, and they cannot be taken lightly or considered as individual behavior or normal criminal acts.”

According to *al-Ahram*, the government appointed security to guard controversial television presenter and journalist Ibrahim Eissa after al-Qa’ida marked him for assassination in one of its online publications in July for ridiculing “Islamic heroes.” Eissa is renowned for publicly advocating positions challenging the dominant religious discourse. Al-Qa’ida accused him of disparaging Khalid ibn al-Walid, a 7th-century military commander who served Muhammad and the first two Rashidun Caliphs. Al-Qa’ida also accused Eissa of abandoning his Muslim faith.

According to the Associated Press, on June 11, the Alexandria Criminal Court convicted Nehru Abdel Tawfiq of killing Coptic priest Father Arsenious Wadid of the Church of the Holy Virgin and St Paul in Alexandria on April 7. Tawfiq stabbed Wadid to death while Wadid was accompanying a group of church youths on a beach outing. Associated Press said investigators described Tawfiq as an Islamist. *Middle East Monitor* said he reportedly did not know Wadid but targeted him based on Wadid's priestly attire. Grand Imam al-Tayyeb offered condolences to Pope Tawadros and the Christian community for the killing.

According to family members, on June 7, Copt Kyrillos Megally died in the hospital from injuries sustained in a knife attack three days earlier in the village of Arab Mahdy in Akhmim, Sohag Governate. A lawyer for the Megally family said authorities charged Abdullah Hosni, a Muslim, after he confessed to the killing. According to Megally's brother, Hosni had a history of attacking Christians in the village. *Cairo24* reported that on December 11, the Sohag Criminal Court referred the case to the Grand Mufti for a religious opinion on whether to consider the death penalty should Hosni be found guilty. The court was expected to render a verdict in January 2023.

Copts United reported that in July, the Omraniya Public Prosecutor's Office in Giza Governate detained for investigation Ahmed Mohammed Salah, who was accused of killing Joseph Israel, the Coptic proprietor of a liquor store, and attempting to kill his son. Salah reportedly stabbed them while crying "Allahu Akbar." Witnesses said Salah did not know the victims and went to the store after leaving a mosque where he had performed the dawn prayer.

Copts Today reported that on June 14, Copt Mona Wafdi Marzouk accused a neighbor, Qassim Faleh, of trying to kill her. Marzouk was injured and treated in a nearby hospital. Faleh, who reportedly had a criminal record, allegedly stole belongings from the house of another Copt, Ragaa Nages, before attacking Marzouk. Muslims in the village condemned the attack and expressed support for Marzouk. Police arrested Faleh after the attack.

According to a September social media post, a group affiliated with Islamist Sheikh Abdullah Rushdie assaulted the novelist and writer Ahmed Khaled, also known as Johnny William Arthur, while chanting "Long live Islam and Abdullah Rushdie, and down with the infidels and polytheists." Arthur had reportedly engaged in several online disputes with Islamists generally and Rushdie specifically.

On more than 10 occasions during the year, Coptic families announced the disappearance of female relatives, several of whom were minors. In some cases, families said the disappearances were related to abductions or forced conversions to Islam. Government

authorities reportedly often worked to return these women and girls to their families. In at least two cases, Coptic women appeared in videos saying they had willingly converted to Islam and showing conversion certificates. Coptic Solidarity stated that more than 500 Coptic girls and women had been abducted in recent years. Clerics and laypersons from the Coptic community stated these cases were often rooted in family disputes, mixed-religion romantic relationships, or efforts by Coptic women to seek divorces that were often not permitted under Coptic religious bylaws.

Al-Masrawy reported that in April, dozens of Copts demonstrated in the Diocese of Beni Suef in Beni Suef Governorate to protest the disappearance of Maryam Wahib, a Copt, and her infant daughter, and to demand police intervention to find them. Social media users circulated a video of Wahib announcing her conversion to Islam. Her husband, Joseph Saad, said his wife appeared distressed in the video, indicating to him that she had converted under duress. Two days after her disappearance, Wahib returned home with her daughter and reportedly renounced her conversion. Her family publicly thanked President Sisi, Pope Tawadros, and security authorities at all levels for their efforts in the case.

In June, actor Naglaa Badr posted on Facebook that a renowned hotel in al-Alamein on the North Coast denied her accommodation due to “the absence of her husband,” even though she was on a work assignment. The hotel said Badr arrived without a reservation and it had no empty rooms, which Badr denied.

In August, BBC News Arabic reported some public venues, including upscale restaurants, denied access to women wearing hijabs. Women wearing hijabs also reportedly had difficulty buying property in certain neighborhoods. One woman said the doorman at a restaurant in the Zamalek neighborhood of Cairo turned her away, saying, “The headscarf is forbidden.” Several real estate brokers told an undercover reporter to look elsewhere when he said his wife wore a hijab.

Members of the country’s Shia community again said that they risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing their religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought. They also said they often worked in informal/gig economy jobs because other private employers refused to hire them.

Copts Today reported Gerges Magdi, one of two Coptic soccer players in the Egyptian Premier League, was criticized heavily on social media for making the sign of the cross after scoring a goal during a match in July. Other social media users defended his right to acknowledge his beliefs. In September, the Egyptian Referees’ Committee suspended soccer referee and Copt

Wael Farhan, despite his meeting all conditions and passing all examinations to serve as a referee, because of a Coptic religious tattoo on his arm. His fellow referees and several players rallied to Farhan's defense and the committee reinstated him less than a month later.

Copts Today reported that in August, the private Misr University for Science and Technology expelled Mina al-Sayed Attallah, a Christian student at the Faculty of Medicine, after accusing him of contempt of Islam. The university said in its official statement, "The college's Student Disciplinary Board decided to permanently expel him from the university for insulting Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and his wife Aisha." The board did not provide more detail about what Attallah allegedly said. Social media activists criticized the decision.

In April, Pope Tawadros presided over Palm Sunday Mass at St. Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria for the first time since the suicide bombing of the cathedral on Palm Sunday in 2017. The attack, in which the Pope narrowly escaped injury, killed 18 worshippers and injured dozens of Copts and police officers. ISIS-SP claimed responsibility for the attack.

In April during Ramadan, Copt Silvia Boutros complained in a Facebook post that the Koshari Tahrir restaurant in Cairo refused to serve her food during the day while she was with her child, stating it did not serve food before iftar during Ramadan. After calls for a boycott of the restaurant spread on social media, the restaurant issued an apology and attributed the refusal to "individual behavior by one of the employees," adding that it did not reflect restaurant policy. Later in the month, social media activists criticized the company Nola Cupcakes for allegedly refusing to sell ice cream to a three-year-old Copt before iftar. The company called the child's parent to apologize and stated it had suspended the employee and supervisor involved in the incident.

In March, the Cairo-based NGO Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue issued a report titled *Early Marriage of Underage Girls in Egypt and Renewing Religious Discourse*. The report discussed the problem of underage marriage and the occasional role of religious authorities in promoting it by conducting religious ceremonies but not officially registering the marriage. The report alleged that members of the clergy, particularly in rural areas, frequently agreed to register marriage contracts for girls aged 13 to 17. The NGO estimated that 117,000 underage girls married annually, but cautioned the actual figure could be higher due to underreporting.

Atheists and secularists on social media called for Arab-speaking nonreligious persons to share their stories on February 22, branding the effort the "We are Here" campaign. Egyptian participation in the campaign was limited, and several social media activists in the country

criticized the effort. The television station *Al-Hurra* stated, “While Arab atheists seek to publish their stories and experiences from outside the region on cyberspace, atheists inside these [Arab] countries cannot speak out on their beliefs for fear of reprisals or legal prosecution.”

Amid what MEMRI described as “a recent spate of ISIS attacks in the Sinai,” local press published several articles that MEMRI said called for eliminating terrorism “by expunging fundamentalist Islam, which forms the basis of the religious ideology espoused by the terrorist organizations.” On May 9, Ahmed Sa’ad al-Zayed wrote in *al-Dustour*, “There is no choice but to create a new brand of religion, friendly to the [entire] human race, patriotic, and based on humane values that are suitable to the current age ... We must realize that confronting these takfiri ideologies [that accuse others of heresy] is not the task of the security apparatuses alone.... We must draft a large-scale humanistic plan ... dismantling and exposing the foundations and principles of the ideology that sells criminal religiosity, and present religious and humane alternatives in collaboration with Muslim and non-Muslim countries.” On May 11, journalist Khaled Montasser wrote in *al-Ahram*, “Quite a while ago, we heard there was a plan to teach children the shared moral principles that form the basis of all religions, but so far this hasn’t happened. Sadly, there are teachers who still regard the loading of children’s [minds] with religion as [a form of] jihad ... Why are children taught stories ... full of terms of exclusion, such as ‘infidels,’ [or] ‘enemies of Allah’...? Why not take the opportunity to tell stories about cooperation and solidarity between Muslims and Christians who [disregarded] the sectarian differences between them?” On May 27, author Salwa Bakr said during an interview on Ten TV, “Education is no longer secular. It has been painted with a backward religious hue.... When ... little girls are forced to wear the hijab, when you stop teaching sports, music, drawing, and dancing at school... By doing all these things, you prepare the cultural and ideological ground for a person who might grow up to be an ISIS terrorist.”

Media outlets reported that in June, Coptic Pope Tawadros II received Archbishop Leonid Gorbachev, Exarch of the ROC in Africa. During the visit, the ROC announced the Coptic Orthodox Church had donated Saint Menas Church in Giza, near Cairo, for use as the ROC headquarters in Africa. The Catholic media outlet *The Tablet* reported critics said the ROC’s move was “in retaliation for the recognition of a new independent Ukrainian [Orthodox] Church” by Greek Orthodox Pope and Patriarch Theodoros II, who traditionally wields ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the continent. *The Orthodox Times* reported that in a July letter to Pope Tawadros, Patriarch Theodoros said Tawadros’ decision “interferes with my direct administrative and pastoral jurisdiction as the Orthodox Archbishop of Alexandria and as Pope and Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of All Africa on matters that concern purely intra-

Orthodox relations.” In his letter, Patriarch Theodoros also wrote that the ROC “for its own purposes unilaterally disavows any other Orthodox Church that has recognized the autocephaly granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.”

Grand Imam al-Tayyeb made multiple public references to the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence*, which he signed with Pope Francis in 2019 as a framework for “a world full of prosperity, tolerance, peace, and love.” The media outlet *Al-Masry al-Youm* reported Pope Francis started his speech in an online conference to mark the second International Day of Human Fraternity in February by saluting Grand Imam al-Tayyeb. The leaders met on the margins of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue” in November in Manama, after which the Grand Imam expressed appreciation for Pope Francis’ efforts to promote the values of peace and coexistence embodied in the human fraternity document.

MEMRI reported that on August 24, journalist and politician Osama al-Ghazali Harb wrote in *al-Ahram* that the Holocaust was “one of the greatest crimes of mass extermination in human history” and that the Nazis killed an estimated six million Jews. MEMRI said al-Ghazali was apparently responding to a statement by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas that Israel had perpetrated “50 massacres” and “50 holocausts” against the Palestinians since 1947. MEMRI stated several journalists, including Gallal Aref, head of Egypt’s Press Council, and *al-Ahram* editor-in-chief Abd al-Mohsen Salama published articles agreeing with Abbas that Israel’s actions against Palestinians were “holocausts.”

In May and June, the United Arab Emirates research and consulting firm ASDA’A-BCW conducted a poll of youth between the ages of 18 and 24 in 17 Arab states and territories, and reported 62 percent of Egyptian respondents said preserving their religious and cultural identity was more important than creating a more globalized society.

Section IV.

U.S

U.S. government representatives at multiple levels, including the Ambassador and other embassy officials, regularly raised religious freedom concerns with senior government officials. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives discussed church legalization and construction, preservation of Jewish cultural heritage and sites, interfaith dialogue, and countering religious extremism with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, and regional governors. In these meetings, embassy officers emphasized the U.S.

commitment to religious freedom and raised issues including fire safety in houses of worship; prospective changes to the Personal Status Law; lack of legal recognition for religious minorities; the apportionment of land for burial of unrecognized religious minorities; access to Jewish communal archives for the country's Jewish residents and the Jewish diaspora; and the use of religious designations on national identity cards.

In October, the U.S. President met with Patriarch Theodoros at the White House. The embassy consulted with the Patriarchate of Alexandria before and after Patriarch Theodoros' inaugural visit to the United States.

Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with senior officials in the offices of Grand Imam of al-Azhar al-Tayyeb; Dar al-Iftaa, Pope Tawadros; Patriarch Theodoros; bishops and senior pastors of Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican churches; members of the Jewish community, and representatives of unrecognized minorities, including Shia Muslims, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and atheists. In these meetings, embassy staff members discussed cases in which administrative courts applied inconsistent or discriminatory standards to members of unrecognized religious minorities and prosecuted individuals for religious defamation. Other topics included the government's continued policy of designating religious affiliation on national identity cards that minorities said enabled religious discrimination, religiously based employment discrimination, and reported harassment of religious converts. In addition, they discussed progress on religious freedom issues, such as continued issuance of permits for existing churches and construction of new churches, support for Christian and Jewish communities, and the protection and restoration of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious sites.

On January 24, the embassy partnered with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to host the country's first Holocaust Remembrance Day Commemoration. Attendees included president of the National Council for Human Rights Moushira Khattab, head of Egypt's Jewish community Magda Haroun, and representatives from universities and research organizations. The event recognized Arabs who confronted intolerance and hatred by saving Jews during World War II, including Mohamed Helmy, an Egyptian doctor living in Berlin in the 1940s who sheltered a Jewish teenager being sought by Gestapo. The Ambassador told attendees, "Teaching and learning about the full historic reality of the Holocaust is an important factor in combatting antisemitism and promoting religious freedom. Additionally, an understanding of the Holocaust reinforces the message that individuals can play a significant role in confronting persecution wherever it arises."

In October, an embassy representative traveled to Minya Governorate in Upper Egypt and met with representatives from the Ministry of Awqaf, Coptic Orthodox Church, Coptic and Evangelical Organization for Social Services, and a Jesuit-administered youth and community education project partially supported by the embassy. Topics of conversation included interfaith dialogue, fire safety in places of worship, and efforts by religious leaders to counter gender-based violence.

In November, the Chargé d’Affaires publicly inaugurated a section of Cairo’s Karaite Jewish Cemetery that had been cleaned and refurbished through a \$150,000 grant from the embassy. The American Research Center in Egypt implemented the project in cooperation with the Drop of Milk Foundation, an NGO dedicated to cultural preservation for Cairo’s Jewish community.

From November to December, the embassy conducted a six-week “English for Religious and Cultural Purposes” training course for 20 women preachers working for al-Azhar’s Observatory for Combating Extremism. The program focused on developing critical thinking skills and empowering the preachers to engage with different social and religious groups and cultures to promote interfaith dialogue, mutual understanding, and religious tolerance.

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