



2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt

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Executive Summary

The constitution describes freedom of belief as "absolute" but only provides adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism the right to practice their religion freely and to build houses of worship. The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The government continued not to recognize several religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Bahai Faith, and restricted their activities. Rights advocates said the government was sometimes slow in responding to sectarian violence, especially outside of major cities. Government officials regularly encouraged participation in "customary reconciliation" sessions to address incidents of sectarian violence, which human rights groups and Christians said constituted an encroachment on the judicial system and on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship, and regularly led to outcomes unfavorable to minority parties. Courts charged citizens with "denigration of religion." Some of these cases resulted in convictions and jail sentences. In September the government enacted a new law facilitating approval of church construction and licensure of churches, replacing one mandating presidential approval for the construction of any new church. Some government entities continued to use anti-Shia rhetoric, and the government regularly failed to condemn anti-Semitic commentary. Christians reported discrimination by authorities at local levels, especially in rural areas. After a string of violent sectarian incidents in Minya, the government replaced the governor and chief of security there as part of a larger reshuffle. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi continued to call on Muslim scholars to renew religious discourse and challenge the ideology of extremists. In response, government and religious institutions at times defended the rights of Shia, continued to reform school curricula, and openly discussed alternatives to consensus Islamic jurisprudence. According to several churches' representatives, the government had nearly completed rebuilding the 78 churches and other religious sites that were damaged or destroyed in mob violence in 2013, following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government.

Religious minorities continued to face significant threats of terrorist attacks and sectarian violence. On December 11, a suicide bomb attack later claimed by ISIS killed 29 people during Sunday services at part of the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral complex in Cairo. Three armed men killed a Coptic Orthodox priest in North Sinai in June, and assailants armed with bats and knives attacked the families of two Coptic Orthodox priests in Minya in July, killing one family member and injuring three. In May a crowd stripped an elderly Christian woman at a village in Minya, paraded her through the streets, and set fire to her house. According to International Christian Concern, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), Christians were targeted for kidnapping. Media reported that two men burned down a church in Ismailia village. Individuals accused of denigration of religion often faced social intolerance. Societal resistance, including acts of violence, to the building and rebuilding of churches continued. Anti-Semitic speech continued. Reports of defamatory speech against other minority religious groups were fewer than in the previous year.

Senior U.S. representatives met with government officials to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. During a visit in September, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Middle East and South and Central Asia called for equal rights for all Egyptian

citizens. In meetings with high-level officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior, he emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of cases, including attacks on Christians, recognition of Bahais and Jehovah's Witnesses, and the rights of Shia to perform their religious rituals publicly. Embassy officers regularly engaged with human rights advocates, religious leaders, and community members on questions of religious freedom, for example, on the rights of all citizens to choose their religion, build houses of worship, and practice their religious rituals, as well as the government's responsibility to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian attacks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 94.7 million (July 2016 estimate). Most media reports state that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 percent Christian (estimates range from 5 percent to 15 percent). Approximately 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A law enacted at the end of September delegates authority to approve requests for church building and renovation permits to governors, rather than the president as was required previously. The governor is to respond within four months; any refusal must include a written justification. The new law also includes provisions to legalize existing unlicensed churches and rescinds preconditions established in the 1930s. It stipulates that, in the event a request to license an existing building used as a church is refused, the use of the building to conduct church services and rites may not be prevented. Under the new law, the size of new churches depends on a government determination of the "number and need" of Christians in the area. New churches must also meet land registration and building codes not required for mosques.

Under a separate law governing the construction of mosques, the Ministry of Awqaf approves permits to build mosques. The law does not stipulate any government role in reviewing the number or size of mosques based on its assessment of the number of Muslims in the area, but there is a provision regarding the minimum distance between mosques. The law does not require Ministry of Awqaf approval for mosque renovations.

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

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

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

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims with documentation from a cleric. Since the state does not recognize Bahai marriage, married Bahais are denied the legal rights of married couples of other religious beliefs, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse's permanent residence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Government Practices

In spite of numerous speeches by President Sisi underscoring that all Egyptians were equal citizens under the law, numerous religious freedom and human rights activists said that government officials, courts, and prosecutors sometimes did not extend procedural safeguards and rights of due process to members of minority faiths. For example, prison authorities at the local level delayed a court-ordered release of a noted

convert from Islam to Christianity, according to international human rights groups and the press. According to sources in the Christian community, security and police officials sometimes failed to respond in a timely manner to attacks on Christians and their homes, businesses, and places of worship, especially in Upper Egypt. The government frequently failed to investigate or prosecute such attacks, relying instead on the controversial practice of "customary reconciliation" sessions whereby both sides in a dispute negotiated a settlement brokered by religious or other community leaders. Although there were reports that police rescued Christian victims of kidnappings, police action was not always prompt, activists said.

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

Subsequently, at an October conference on fatwa issuance for imams serving in Muslim expatriate communities, the grand imam encouraged qualified Islamic scholars to use their analytical reasoning skills in issuing fatwas appropriate for the modern-day societies in which they live, and not allow fear of going against centuries-old jurisprudence to cause their fatwas to "stagnate." Subsequently he announced that Al Azhar would establish a "Committee of *Fiqh*" (jurisprudence) which would engage in *ijtihad* (analytical reasoning) to address some Islamic doctrinal issues, thereby asserting space for renewal of religious discourse, although the scope remained limited.

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

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

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

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

On February 23, Edko Misdemeanor court upheld Mostafa Abdel-Naby's three-year prison sentence for denigrating religion for declaring his atheism and insulting Allah on Facebook in 2014.

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

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

On May 28, First October 6 Misdemeanor Court acquitted Salafist television preacher Mohamed Hassan of denigrating Islam when he recounted a story from early Islamic sources that Khadija, one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, had deliberately plied her father with wine and extracted his approval of the marriage when he was drunk.

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

In the wake of these and other convictions for denigration of religions, a coalition of 13 human rights organizations, four political parties, and a number of lawyers, journalists, and public figures issued a statement condemning the rulings for "supporting terrorism" by "suffocating every opinion exposing the roots of terrorism in our heritage and ideas." Signatories included the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.

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

The government closed the tomb of Imam Al-Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, located in Al-Hussein Mosque in Old Cairo, during the three-day commemoration of Ashura in October, for what it said were security reasons. The mosque remained open.

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

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

After a string of violent sectarian incidents in Minya, the government replaced the governor and chief of security there as part of a larger reshuffle. According to press reports, Copts regarded the move as a positive step toward improving security in the region. When the new governor visited the Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Minya on his first day in office on September 9, the governor stated that Minya's sectarian problems should be resolved by upholding the law, according to press reports. The bishop called for the rule of law, justice,

and equality, and said the governor's appointment "promised a new era of peace and security," according to press reports. The Bishop of Minya repeated in several statements to the media that he would no longer agree to deal with sectarian incidents through customary reconciliation. According to a study published July 27 in *Watani*, the country's Coptic-run weekly, 65 percent of violent attacks against Copts took place in Minya.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ministry of Education withdrew its appointment of Mervat Abo Sefein as Director of Beni Mazar Secondary Girls' School, Minya, after students chanted that they would not accept a Christian director, according to human rights organization Tahir Institute. The ministry then appointed Abo Sefein as Director of the Boys' Technical School of Beni Mazar but rescinded the appointment after students protested it. The ministry stated it had reversed the decision based on complaints from "earlier in Abo Sefein's career," according to media outlet *Yum7*.

In January Al Azhar canceled a competition entitled "The Spread of Shia Islam in the Sunni Community: Reasons, Dangers, and How to Confront It." According to press reports, the cancellation was due to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar's desire to promote unity and fraternity among Muslims.

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

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

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

The government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country on condition they not proselytize to Muslims. According to community representatives, non-Muslim minorities and foreign religious workers generally refrained from proselytizing to Muslims to avoid risking legal penalties and extralegal repercussions from authorities and members of the local community.

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

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

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Lethal violence connected with religion continued. On December 11, 29 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack during Sunday services at Saints Peter and Paul Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo. In attacks claimed by a terrorist organization that had pledged allegiance to ISIS, a Coptic priest and a Sufi sheikh in northern Sinai were killed. Assailants killed a Christian in Minya. The construction of churches continued to meet societal resistance, including acts of violence. According to International Christian Concern, there were kidnappings of Christian women and children. Muslim Brotherhood groups adopted rhetoric targeting Christians and Jews, according to media reports.

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

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

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

There were numerous reports of incidents of sectarian mob violence against Coptic Christians, including attacks resulting from Muslim opposition to the presence of churches in their communities. On July 17,

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

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

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

On June 29, Muslims in Kom al-Loufi village in Minya Governorate attacked a Christian-owned home after rumors spread that he intended to use the new house he was building as a church. The assailants set fire to the home and to three other homes owned by the Christian resident's brothers. Two days earlier, security officers had forced construction workers to stop work at the house, reportedly due to tensions between Christians and Muslims in the community. Following the attack, police arrested 19 suspects on charges of "creating chaos," arson, and resisting authorities. All were released on bail within a month. An MP told the press that victims had received death threats if they did not agree to customary reconciliation and withdraw their complaints. The victims refused, insisting that the perpetrators be prosecuted in court.

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

On July 22, several dozen residents returning from Friday prayers attacked the homes of Christians, throwing rocks and glass, in Saft Al Kharsa village in the Governorate of Beni Suef. According to media outlet *Yout7* and videos of the attack on Youtube, the attack was incited by a rumor that a Christian resident intended to transform the second floor of his house into a church. Police arrested 18 Muslims for the violence, as well as eight Christians, following the attack. According to press reports, the Muslim suspects were detained pending investigation on charges of inciting violence, rioting, and attacking the houses and property of Christians, but released after several weeks. Christian news outlet *Watani* reported that eight Christians were also held without charge for varying periods, with some for up to one month. Two were released after 18

days of detention and three after 29 days on August 19, while the remaining three were released a few days after that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Representatives of some Salafist groups, including the Coalition of Muslims in Defense of the Companions and the Prophet's Family, published negative remarks about Shia Muslims. On February 1, the group

threatened to sue the minister of culture for "spreading Shia ideology" when the minister rejected their calls to confiscate Shia books exhibited at the Cairo International Book Fair.

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

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

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

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

Presbyterians, Baptists, Brethren, Open Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala) constituted the Protestant Council. The Anglican Church in Egypt operated outside the council as a diocese of the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Ambassador and other Department of State and embassy officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior. These included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable; prosecuted individuals for religious defamation; participated in customary reconciliation sessions to address sectarian violence which human rights groups and many Christians described as unfair; placed restrictions on religious discourse; and failed to recognize conversion of Muslim-born citizens. Embassy representatives also met with leading religious figures, including the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Grand Mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa, the Coptic Orthodox Pope, other leading Christian clergy, and representatives of the Jewish and Bahai communities.

In addition, Department of State officials, including the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, met with representatives of these and other religious minority communities. In meetings with high level officials at the Ministries of Foreign affairs and Interior, the Special Advisor emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of cases, for example of attacks on Christians, recognition of Bahais and Jehovah's Witnesses, and the rights of Shia to publicly perform religious rituals. Embassy officials maintained an active dialogue with human rights advocates, religious leaders, and community members on questions of religious freedom, for example, on combating anti-Semitism, supporting the rights of all citizens to choose their religion, build houses of worship, and practice their religious rituals as well as the government's responsibility to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian attacks.

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