



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt

Publisher [United States Department of State](#)

Publication Date 14 October 2015

Cite as United States Department of State, *2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt*, 14 October 2015, available at:
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/562105ac15.html> [accessed 23 October 2015]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Executive Summary

The 2014 constitution describes freedom of belief as "absolute" and provides adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism the right to practice their religion freely and to build houses of worship. However, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam to any other religion. The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. It also provides for the establishment of an anti-discrimination commission and requires parliament to pass a new law facilitating the construction and renovation of Christian churches. The government prosecuted individuals for "defaming religion" under the penal code, and individuals accused of blasphemy often faced social intolerance and, in some cases, violence. Police and security officials reportedly failed to respond in cases of kidnapping and extortion of Christians in Upper Egypt. The June 30 Fact-Finding Committee, which was established by presidential decree in 2013 to investigate the post-June 2013 violence, released in November the executive summary of its report and ascribed responsibility for the attacks on churches to members of the Muslim Brotherhood. President Sisi met with the leaders of the country's major Christian groups to discuss their concerns. Accountability for previous sectarian crimes was uneven, and government officials and community leaders continued to sponsor reconciliation sessions – extrajudicial resolutions of sectarian conflict – which human rights advocates and some Christian groups regarded as largely unfair. In an effort to prevent speech in mosques promoting sectarianism or inciting violence, the government enacted a new law mandating stricter penalties for imams preaching in mosques without a license, and published weekly instructions for imams regarding the acceptable content of their sermons. The law granted officials of the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Ministry of Awqaf) arrest authority over those who violated it. The government used anti-Shia rhetoric and anti-Semitic commentary, which appeared in public and private media.

Sectarian violence throughout the country declined during the year. Christians in Upper Egypt, however, were targeted for kidnapping and extortion disproportionately. Building and re-building churches in the absence of anticipated legislation was sometimes met with societal resistance, occasionally turning violent. Discrimination against atheists continued; those who appeared on television talk shows were vilified by the hosts and faced societal rejection, including attacks and lawsuits.

The U.S. President, Secretary of State, Charge d'Affaires, and other senior officials emphasized the government's responsibility to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion; all raised concerns about restrictions on religious freedom and discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the public. The President reaffirmed in January the commitment of the United States to work for the protection of Christians and other people of faith in Egypt. The Secretary of State met in June with government officials and civil society leaders in Cairo and emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom. The U.S. government sponsored exchange programs to promote tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 86.9 million (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 percent is Christian. The majority of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population and include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian), Maronite, Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), Anglican/Episcopalian, and 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). Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

Shia Muslims constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Some press accounts estimated the number of atheists to be as high as four million, although other accounts placed their number in the low thousands. There are also small groups of Quranists and Ahmadi Muslims.

Accurate numbers for the Jewish community are difficult to determine, but it is believed to number no more than 40 persons. There are 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and about 2,000 Bahais.

There are many foreign resident adherents of various religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2014 constitution, ratified by referendum in January, distinguishes between freedom of belief and freedom to practice religion, as did the constitutions of 2012 and 1971. It specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The constitution describes the freedom of belief as absolute; however, it limits the freedom to practice religious rituals to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, to which it refers as the "divine religions." Likewise, the constitution provides the right to establish houses of worship only to those three groups. The constitution mandates that the new parliament must issue a law during its first legislative term to facilitate the construction and renovation of Christian churches, which is expected to reduce existing barriers to church construction. The government announced parliamentary elections would commence in March 2015. The constitution states that Al-Azhar, the religious university in the country, is "the main reference in theology and Islamic Affairs."

Under the penal code, denigrating religions, promoting extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning any of the "divine religions," and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months' to five years' imprisonment.

The new constitution stipulates equality before the law irrespective of one's religion. It also stipulates that discrimination and incitement of hatred is a crime punishable by law. It mandates the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be created by law once the new parliament is seated.

According to law, the president must issue a decree authorizing the construction of new churches, while the local Office of the District Authority must approve renovations and repairs. A Ministry of Interior (MOI) decree issued in the 1930s and still generally followed specifies 10 conditions the government must consider before authorizing construction, including that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from an existing mosque and that Christian communities in Muslim-majority neighborhoods obtain local approval before applying to the president for authorization to build a church. Christian advocacy groups expressed hope the constitutionally mandated law facilitating church construction and renovation would expand the ability of Christians to establish churches, as compared to previous regulations. According to the law, the Ministry of Awqaf approves permits to build mosques, but a study published by a local human rights NGO states that many mosques are built without acquiring permits.

Only Islam, Christianity, or Judaism may be indicated in the religion field on national identity cards. Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam in practice, and Muslim-born citizens who leave Islam for another religion may not change the religion field on their identity cards.

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. In marital affairs, however, the law stipulates that spouses must be members of the same denomination within a religion for courts to apply these canonical laws. In cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other a member of a different religious denomination, the courts apply sharia. All citizens remain subject to sharia in matters of inheritance and adoption.

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In keeping with sharia, non-Muslim men must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim 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. Custody of children is then awarded to the mother.

The minor children of Muslim converts to Christianity, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, automatically remain classified as Muslims.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) bans the hijab in primary schools, but allows it in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

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.

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.

The Ministry of Awqaf is required to license all mosques; however, many operate without licenses. The government has the authority to appoint and monitor the imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and pays their salaries. In June former interim President Adly Mansour issued legislation regulating sermons and religious lessons in mosques in an effort to eliminate the use of speech in mosque sermons that promotes sectarianism or incites violence. The new law provides for harsher penalties for preaching without a license, including a prison term of up to one year and/or a fine of up to 50,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (\$6,993) for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from Awqaf or Al-Azhar. The penalty is doubled for repeat offenders. On October 19, the Ministry of Justice granted judicial authority to 100 Awqaf inspectors to arrest imams violating this law. A 2013 decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters, bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services, and requires Friday sermons to follow government guidelines.

Christian, Muslim, and Jewish denominations can request official recognition from the government, which gives the denomination the right to be governed by its canonical laws, practice religious rituals, and establish houses of worship. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the MOI's 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 registration is then referred to the president for decision. If a religious group fails to obtain official registration and continues to hold meetings, its members potentially face detention and prosecution for harming social cohesion or denigrating religions.

The law does not recognize the Bahai Faith or its religious laws and bans Bahai institutions and community activities. Bahais do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. Since the state does not recognize Bahai marriage, married Bahais are denied the legal rights of married couples, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse's permanent residence. According to sources in the Bahai community, the government does not actively attempt to prevent private worship by Bahais.

President Sisi in June issued legislation regulating elections for the House of Representatives (HOR), which contains 540 elected seats and 27 appointed seats. The HOR law mandates a minimum of 24 Christians must be elected through party lists in the first parliamentary elections after the constitution's ratification, an increase over the previous parliament, which included 13 Christians. Christians may also compete for independent seats and be appointed to others. The current constitution, like previous ones, grants the president the authority to appoint 5 percent of the seats and, historically, presidents have used this power to appoint some Christians.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion. There were no known cases of enforcement during the year. The penal code defines discrimination as "any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to gender, origin, language, religion, or belief."

The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) 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.

Government Practices

The government failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes targeting members of religious minority groups, which fostered a climate of impunity. The government failed to protect Christians targeted by kidnappings and extortion, and there were reports that security and police officials sometimes failed to respond to these crimes, especially in Upper Egypt. The government continued to prosecute individuals for denigrating religions. There were incidents of police abuse of Christians and atheists. The government renewed an investigation into a potential defamation of Islam charge against Muhammad Hegazy, a convert from Islam to Christianity. The government continued to harass Shia and prohibit conversion from Islam. Some government bodies continued to vilify Shia and atheists. The government failed to condemn some anti-Semitic speech.

According to a local human rights organization, police beat and arrested Christian residents of Gabal El-Teir village, township of Samalot, Minya Governorate, and raided Christian-owned houses September 15, after local Christians demonstrated at the Gabal El-Teir police station over the alleged kidnapping of a Coptic woman for forcible conversion to Islam. The protests became violent, with multiple reports of demonstrators throwing rocks at police and police firing gunshots into the air. The confrontation left three policemen injured and the windows of two police vehicles smashed, according to the MOI. According to the same human rights organization, the raids on Christian-owned houses were carried out by central security forces and riot police at midnight, after the dispersal of the protest. The group said the officers destroyed items in villagers' homes and arrested at least 65 Copts for assaulting security forces. Witnesses stated that detainees were beaten during their arrest, with some tied up and dragged through the streets of the village. The human rights organization described the response by security forces as "amounting to collective punishment of the village's Christians." Most of the detainees were released shortly after, although 12 remained in detention until September 23, when they were released on EGP 5,000 (\$699) bail, according to local media. The incidents prompted the NCHR to promise investigations into the violations, after it received numerous complaints about police actions. Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim met with a delegation of Coptic Orthodox clergy from Minya September 23, during which he announced the MOI would compensate the families for their financial losses. At year's end, the MOI had not disbursed any compensation.

Coptic Orthodox Church leaders said the kidnappings and extortion of Christians increased following the August 2013 attacks on churches and police stations, as the security situation deteriorated nationwide. In his testimony to the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee formed by former interim president Adly Mansour in 2013 to investigate the post-June 2013 violence, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros identified kidnapping as among the most significant problems facing Christians. Since 2011, in many population centers Christians and Muslims alike were victimized. In Upper Egypt, however, Christians were disproportionately targets of these crimes, and to a lesser degree in the Cairo area and in the north. According to media reports, interviews with Coptic victims' attorneys and Coptic clergy, Christians in the Minya, Qena, Assiut, and North Sinai Governorates were specifically targeted for kidnappings for ransom. Three kidnappings took place in June in North Sinai. The family of one of the victims, businessman Gamal Shenouda, paid EGP 300,000 (\$41,958) in ransom to the kidnappers, according to a local civil society organization. In Naga Hammadi, Qena, the captors of Malak Zaghoul, a merchant, returned him on July 7, five days after he was kidnapped, after his family paid a ransom of an undisclosed amount. In comments to the press in July, a Coptic Orthodox religious leader complained of the frequency of kidnappings in Naga Hammadi and blamed security agencies for their inability to protect Copts. He stated that the number of abduction cases exceeded 70 in the city in the past three years. A report published in November by the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee, citing MOI data, stated the total number of kidnapped Christians since 2011 to be 140, 96 of whom returned.

There were unconfirmed reports of administrative penalties imposed on police leaders in July for negligence in deterring the recurrent kidnappings in Naga Hammadi. Church leaders raised the issue with President Sisi in an August meeting. The president said the state would pay additional

attention to the problems of Christians, according to the presidency's public statement following the meeting.

In a March report, a local human rights organization documented eight cases of extortion and 12 cases of robbery and kidnapping involving Copts in Shamia village, from which the perpetrators obtained more than EGP 1.5 million (\$210,000) in ransom payments during the period September 2013 to January 2014. The organization reported that security forces raided the village in February, arrested some of the criminal gang members, and confiscated stolen items. By the end of the year, security had been restored to the village and the kidnappings and extortion stopped, according to the local organization.

Human rights activists and Christian leaders stated police and security forces often failed to respond to the kidnapping and extortion of Christians in Upper Egypt, including targeting of landowners. They said that in some areas of Upper Egypt perpetrators forced Christians to pay "protection money." Police reportedly told families of Christian kidnap victims to "pay the ransom and keep quiet." One Christian leader said that the extortions were divesting Christians of their wealth and dignity.

In September attackers reportedly shot and killed a Coptic dentist in Assuit for refusing to pay protection money. In comments to the press, his family said thugs had been threatening to kill him for over a year if he did not pay protection money. They also said he filed several complaints against the individuals, but the police were unresponsive.

There were reports of increasing land thefts from Christians, especially in Upper Egypt.

On October 25, Ahmed Harqan, an atheist, stated that police detained, beat, and interrogated him and his wife after they fled to a police station in Alexandria for protection from a mob threatening them with violence. Five days earlier, Harqan had discussed his atheist beliefs on a widely-viewed television talk show. According to Harqan, the police questioned them about their religious convictions and called them apostates. On October 26, the public prosecutor ordered the investigation of a defamation of religion complaint filed against Harqan by a group of lawyers for statements he made during the talk show. According to local media, Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim El-Naggar, head of El-Dekheila investigations, denied police beat Harqan, stating the police protected him and his wife until the couple was referred to prosecution for interrogation.

Alexandria Security Directorate Chief General Amin Ezz El-Din said in a phone interview in March that a special task force would be formed to arrest Alexandria-based atheists who declared their atheism on social media. No news of the formation of such a unit had emerged by year's end.

In June Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity previously known as Mohamed Hegazy, was sentenced to five years in prison following his December 2013 arrest for "illegally filming demonstrations to stir international public opinion against Egypt." Boulous appealed the lower court's ruling, and the appellate court ordered Boulous' release on July 20, pending a decision on appeal. However, police immediately rearrested Boulous on accusations of blasphemy, and according to a prominent international human rights organization report, reopened a 2009 case of "denigrating Islam." Authorities subsequently held Boulous in pretrial detention. According to a December 11 report by Human Rights Without Frontiers International, Boulous' attorney stated his client was being held illegally, and on December 1 was transferred to a prison cell in Minya reserved for prisoners facing the death penalty. Boulous' lawyer reported police tortured Boulous and subjected him to other mistreatment while in custody. At the end of the year, no charges had been filed against Boulous on the blasphemy case. On December 28, the appellate court accepted Boulous' appeal of his sentence on the illegal filming charge and reduced it to one year. Boulous was previously known for suing the MOI in 2007 for his unsuccessful attempt to

change his legal religious identity from Muslim to Christian, testing the constitutional right of freedom of religion. The administrative court ruled in favor of the MOI.

The trial of 31 suspects for the June 2013 killing of four Shia citizens in the village of Zawyat Abu Muslam in Giza began on December 21. The prosecution charged the suspects with the murder of the four individuals and the attempted murder of 13 others. A mob of thousands of angry villagers had killed 66-year-old Hassan Shehata, a prominent Shia figure, and three others, after weeks of denigration of the Shia by Salafist preachers.

In October the public prosecutor referred 48 suspects to trial for sectarian violence in Al Dabaiya village in Luxor in July 2013 that left one Muslim and four Christians dead. Among the 48 defendants, 19 were charged with murder, seven with incitement to violence, and the rest with arson and vandalism. All the defendants were Muslim, except for three who were charged with the murder of the Muslim victim. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

Several suspects detained for the killings of five Christians – including two children – and a young Muslim man outside St. Mary's Church in Al-Warraaq, Giza, in October 2013 had not been referred to trial at year's end. In November 2013, the public prosecutor banned publishing information on the case. According to the church's leaders and witnesses, there were no security forces in the vicinity of the church at the time of the attack.

Government prosecutors investigated criminal complaints filed by citizens against individuals whose statements or actions were alleged to be blasphemous, denigrating of religion, or insulting to the Prophet Muhammad or other religious figures. Some of these cases went to trial, resulting in the convictions of at least six people during the year, a decrease from 2013 when nine persons were convicted on similar charges. Most of these cases were filed against individuals in Upper Egypt, according to a local human rights organization.

Shia activist Amr Abdullah was sentenced February 26 to five years in prison with labor on charges of denigrating Islam. Abdullah was arrested during Ashura commemorations in November 2013 outside Cairo's Al Hussein Mosque. Abdullah's arrest followed an altercation between him and a group of Salafists. A local human rights group reported the prosecution referred Abdullah to trial based on his statement under questioning that he was a Shia. The court ruled that Abdullah defamed Islam and promoted convictions contrary to majority views. Abdullah appealed the sentence, but the Cairo Court of Appeals rejected his appeal on April 29. The Ministry of Awqaf again instructed imams to prohibit Shia commemorations of Ashura in mosques in 2014. The government closed shrines in the vicinity of Al-Hussein Mosque on November 3, the day of Ashura, and for several days after. Salafist leaders had also asked the government to stop Shia commemorations inside Al-Hussein Mosque.

The West Armant Misdemeanors Court sentenced Kerolos Shawky, a Christian, on June 24 to six years in prison for "liking" a Facebook page that contained commentary perceived as denigrating Islam. Shawky was sentenced to three years in prison for defaming Islam and another three years for fomenting sectarian strife. Prior to his trial the court had released him on bail. On May 28, villagers reportedly distributed leaflets calling for vengeance against Shawky and on May 29, a mob attacked his house, hurling stones and attempting to set fire to it. Police arrested Shawky and six of the assailants, who were subsequently released. Hours before Shawky's first hearing on June 2, villagers threw Molotov cocktails at four Christian-owned shops close to Shawky's village. Shawky appealed the sentence, but on September 27, the Armant Misdemeanor Appellate Court upheld his sentence in absentia after he did not appear for his trial date. There were no further arrests or legal action taken in response to the attacks against Shawky or any of the properties.

On December 27, prosecutors in South Cairo referred journalist Fatima Naooot to trial for denigrating Islam by mocking the Islamic sacrifice ritual conducted by Muslims during Eid El-

Adha. Naoot had posted on October 1 a tweet describing the ritual of sacrificing cows or sheep as a "massacre." Her trial was scheduled to begin in January 2015.

The Luxor Misdemeanor Appellate Court on June 15 sentenced Damiana Abdel Nour, a Christian elementary school teacher, to six months in prison, overturning a lower court's sentence fining her EGP 100,000 (\$13,986) for denigrating Islam in 2013. The public prosecutor had appealed the lower court's sentence, demanding her imprisonment. The parents of three of Abdel Nour's students had filed a complaint accusing her of denigrating Islam and evangelizing among her students during a class on religious life in ancient Egypt. She was reportedly cleared by two independent investigations conducted by the school council and local office of the MOE. Abdel Nour did not attend the final verdict session and remained a fugitive at year's end.

The Beba Misdemeanors Appellate Court on June 5 rejected Karam Saber's appeal of a five-year prison sentence for "insulting the deity and defaming religions" based on his 2011 collection of short stories entitled, *Where is God?* That appeal followed a March retrial by the Beba Partial Court of Beni Suef, which also confirmed the original sentence. Two days earlier the administrative court rejected another suit filed by Saber, citing lack of jurisdiction, demanding the annulment of his trial based on the unconstitutionality of an article in the penal code in light of the 2014 constitution. During his first trial the prosecutor consulted a church in Beni Suef and Al-Azhar for their opinion of the book. Both institutions denounced the book, saying it contradicted the "divine religions" and damaged Egyptian societal values.

In June the MOE demoted Ayman Ramzy, a public school librarian, transferred him to a new school, and barred him from contact with students or teachers after he spoke about his atheistic beliefs during an April appearance on a television program. Parents of students had demanded he be reprimanded after his appearance on the show. The ministry filed complaints against him with the administrative prosecution and officially notified the public prosecutor of the ministry's internal investigations of him. The administrative prosecution referred him to trial on December 17 and his first trial session was scheduled for January 2015. According to the media, the administrative prosecution charged him with promoting atheist ideas at his place of work and publicly through the media "in violation of society's values, negatively affecting communal peace."

On April 30, Salafist televangelist Sheikh Ahmed Abdullah, also known as Sheikh Abu Islam, appealed a three-year prison sentence received in 2013 for denigrating Christianity on a television program. The court reduced his sentence to six months' imprisonment.

Several Muslim converts to Christianity filed lawsuits before the administrative judiciary, requesting the Civil Records Authority, part of the MOI, amend their civil records under the Civil Affairs Law, which provides for an official change in religious status upon the presentation of evidentiary documents from a specialized entity, in this case the church or Al-Azhar. Resolution of the cases was pending a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) on the constitutionality of the article in the law. A lawsuit filed in 2008 alleges the article contradicts the constitution, which stipulates that the principles of Islamic sharia are the main source of legislation. The lawsuit asserts sharia explicitly prohibits conversion from Islam.

On December 29, the Alexandria Administrative Court issued a decision to ban permanently the Abu Hassira festival, an annual pilgrimage by non-Egyptian Jews to the shrine of 19th century scholar Rabbi Yaakov Abu Hassira. The court justified its decision by stating the festival was a "violation of public order and morals" and "incompatible with the solemnity and purity of religious sites." The court additionally revoked the site's designation as an antiquity by the Ministry of Antiquities. It also rejected an Israeli request submitted to UNESCO to transfer Abu Hassira's remains to Israel. The court's decision is subject to appeal. Prior to 2012, the government

allowed the pilgrimage, overriding a similar decision in 2001 by the Alexandria Supreme Administrative Court. Since 2012, however, the government has cancelled the festival citing security concerns.

The NCHR stated it is working on updating the curriculum in public schools to remove all material inconsistent with human rights and equality.

Christians continued to face difficulty in building churches, repairing them, or constructing buildings adjacent to existing churches. According to the media, clashes broke out August 2 between the Christians and Muslims of North Ezbet Yacoub village in the township of Samalot, Minya, when rumors circulated that Copts were planning to convert a house under construction into a church without a permit, and Muslim residents attacked the house. In the aftermath of the clashes, police stopped the construction of another church in the area for approximately one month, according to local clergy. During a meeting with Pope Tawadros in August, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb reportedly stated that Copts were free to build churches, "while taking into consideration the national security dimension." However, certain media outlets subsequently quoted an official statement by Al-Azhar denying el-Tayeb had made that statement.

Investigations into the attack on St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo in April 2013, during the funeral of six Christian victims of sectarian violence, continued at year's end. As of the end of the year, the public prosecutor had charged 21 suspects with rioting, possession of bladed weapons and firearms, and jeopardizing national unity and communal peace.

The government continued to sponsor "reconciliation sessions" after sectarian attacks and intercommunal violence, instead of prosecuting the perpetrators of the crimes. Such reconciliation sessions generally precluded recourse to the judicial system for restitution as, in most cases, the parties agreed to drop all formal charges and lawsuits. Christians viewed the decisions emanating from these sessions as largely unfair, according to NGOs. According to a source in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the church accepted reconciliation sessions in some cases as an immediate measure to stop bloodshed and de-escalate tensions, but did not approve of these sessions as a substitute for the rule of law. The June 30 Fact-Finding Committee called on state authorities to cease their use. These extrajudicial sessions were usually attended by governorate or MOI officials, with Christian and Muslim clergy representing the conflicting parties. Results from these sessions could include some compensation for the aggrieved party and a penalty clause for the breaching of its terms.

In June senior police officials held a reconciliation session between the Coptic Harby family and the Muslim El Samadiya family in Cairo. During a dispute between the two families in February, a member of the Samadiya family was killed. Authorities arrested 13 Christians and charged them with murder, attempted murder, possession of unlicensed firearms, terrorizing citizens, and disrupting communal peace. The reconciliation session was attended by representatives of the families; Major General Yehia El Eraqy; the deputy head of the Cairo Security Directorate; the head of North Cairo investigations; the head of the El Matariya police station; and several local sheikhs. Elders in the area invited Christian clergy, who refused to attend the session, according to a member of the defense team of the Christian family. The settlement from the reconciliation session allowed the continuation of the lawsuit against the Christian family, and compelled the Harby family to move out of the neighborhood, present five empty shrouds to the El-Samadiya (a sign of peacemaking), slaughter five calves, donate 100 camels, and provide 340 square meters of land to build a mosque and one million EGP (\$140,000) for construction expenses. According to a member of the defense team for the Harby family, the family agreed to take part in the reconciliation session to avoid any measures of revenge for the killing of the Samadiya family

member, and to allow the uninvolved members of the family to return of the area, where the family owns property and businesses.

The executive summary of the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee report ascribed responsibility for the attacks on Christians, their private property, and churches to the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. The executive summary reported attacks took place in 21 governorates, where 52 churches were torched completely or partially, 12 other churches and facilities looted, and 402 Christian-owned properties attacked. The report also documented 29 killings of a sectarian nature that occurred during the period June 2013 – June 2014. The report stated there were cases of kidnapping and forced disappearances, mostly for ransom. The committee recommended issuance of a law to facilitate the rebuilding of churches, in keeping with the 2014 constitution. The committee urged reconsideration of the use of the customary reconciliation system to resolve instances of sectarian violence, and advocated additional measures to prevent discrimination in hiring and end hate speech. The committee also called on the judiciary to conclude promptly lawsuits involving sectarian violations, and for security agencies to confront the increase in kidnappings in some areas.

While the constitution prohibits the formation of political parties on the basis of religion, religiously-inspired parties, predominantly those favoring Salafist Islamic ideology, continued to operate. On November 26, the Cairo Court for Urgent Matters dismissed a lawsuit that sought to ban a number of religiously-inspired parties from participating in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, citing lack of jurisdiction.

Anti-Semitic sentiments routinely appeared in both government-owned and private media, and the government made few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and opposition to Israeli policies and practices. For example, on April 28, a Minya court described Islamists sentenced to death for the killing of a police officer as "demons" who followed Jewish scripture. The court also described the men as "enemies of the nation" who used mosques to promote the teachings of "their holy book, the Talmud." In August 2013 in Minya, the court had sentenced 37 defendants in the case to death and 492 others to life imprisonment on charges of breaking into and burning down a police station, burning police vehicles, stealing weapons, murdering a police officer and attempting to murder another.

Government and official Islamic institutions used anti-Shia rhetoric. In a September statement, Awqaf Minister Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa likened Shia followers to the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government designated as a terrorist organization in December 2013, because "they find it permissible to lie to achieve their goals." In a televised interview on September 22, Sheikh Sabry Ebada, Undersecretary of Awqaf, said Shia work to spread a spirit of animosity and hatred in the country. In January the government denied entry to 61 Canadian Shia Muslim pilgrims to visit Shia holy sites, without giving justification, according to press reports. However, there were reports the government stopped Salafist groups from holding conferences engaging in incitement against Shia.

Members of the Bahai community are able to obtain identity cards with a "dash" in the religion field, but their marriages are not recognized or listed on their identity cards. Since 2011, Christians who convert to Islam and then back to Christianity may amend their national identification cards to reflect their chosen faith, according to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order.

Discrimination in government and private hiring remained widespread. While reliable statistics regarding rates of discrimination were unavailable, the report of the June 30 Fact-Finding Committee called on the government to stop discrimination against Christians in hiring. Christians continued to be underrepresented relative to their population in senior government positions. The cabinet under former Prime Minister Hazem El-Beblawi, who was in power from July 2013 to

February 2014, included three Christian ministers out of a total of 36. The two subsequent cabinets of Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehlab also included three Christians, while Hesham Kandil's cabinet, in power from August 2012 to July 2013, had one Christian representative. There were no Christians among the country's 26 governors.

The government discriminated against religious minorities in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities. There were no Christians serving as presidents of the country's 17 public universities and few Christians occupying dean or vice dean positions in the country's public university system, according to academic sources. Only Muslims could study at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. Additionally, the government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Quran. The government compensated Muslim clergy but not Christian clergy.

Following the attacks on churches after the dispersal of the sit-ins of Rabaa Al Adawiya and Al Nahda Squares in Cairo in August 2013, the government announced the army would rebuild destroyed churches at its expense. Bishop Bimen of the Coptic Orthodox Church and head of the church committee in charge of the rebuilding process, commented in the media July 2 that 90 percent of the first stage of restoration was complete, and the armed forces had restored 10 churches and 29 facilities, including schools. He added that restored churches reopened in Minya, Fayoum, Beni Suef, and Sohag. In 2013, the Coptic Orthodox Church had estimated the cost of restoring the damaged churches and schools nationwide at 188 million EGP (\$26.3 million).

There were mass arrests following the August 2013 attacks on churches, police stations, and other facilities in Minya, but few prosecutions. Eleven defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment in June on several charges, including attacking three churches in Suez. Ten of the defendants were tried in absentia. According to local media, on December 18, the Assiut Criminal Court sentenced 41 alleged Muslim Brotherhood supporters to sentences ranging from one to 15 years in prison for attacking several facilities, including five churches. Two were sentenced to 15 years and three to 10 years. The defendants were found guilty of illegal gathering, vandalism of public and private property, attacking citizens, and resisting authorities. The court also obligated them to pay for damages caused to public property.

While neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit proselytizing, the government imposed legal penalties on activities related to proselytizing by non-Muslims. The government generally tolerated foreign religious workers on the condition they did not undertake efforts to proselytize Muslims. Sources stated non-Muslim minorities and foreign religious workers generally refrained from proselytizing to avoid risking legal penalties and extralegal repercussions from authorities and local Islamists.

President Sisi hosted Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II and leaders of other Christian denominations August 7 at the presidential palace. According to the media, the Christian leaders discussed their concerns, including the kidnapping of Christians, the restoration of churches destroyed or damaged in August 2013, the constitutional mandate that parliament pass a law regulating church construction and renovation, and assistance for Christians and other minorities fleeing violence in Iraq.

The government allowed members of unrecognized churches, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, to worship privately in small numbers. According to Jehovah's Witnesses community leaders, they were not allowed to gather for worship services in groups of more than 30 people.

The government banned the importation and sale of Shia and Jehovah Witnesses literature.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Lethal sectarian attacks decreased during the year, according to Christian leaders and activists. On March 28, five people died, including a journalist, in Alf Maskan, Cairo, in clashes after Friday prayers between supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and security forces and local residents. Mary George, a Christian woman who was driving near the clashes, was among the victims. According to her lawyer and eyewitness reports, George was attacked by a group of Muslim Brotherhood supporters when they saw a crucifix hanging in her car. George's lawyer said the demonstrators then pulled her by the hair into the street, where they beat her. According to a forensics report, George and the other four victims were killed by gunshot. Other accounts of the incident indicated demonstrators pulled George out of her car after she was shot, that she was stabbed multiple times, and a patch of hair had been pulled from her head. According to local media, demonstrators, local residents, and police exchanged fire in the area where the deaths took place. After her death, the demonstrators burned George's car. Thirteen suspects, still detained at year's end, were arrested for the murder of the day's victims.

In October a coalition of left-wing parties in the European parliament withdrew its nomination of political activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah for the annual Sakharov Prize because of anti-Semitic statements brought to its attention, including tweets in which Abdel Fattah called for the killings of "a critical number of Israelis" and stated "Dear Zionists, please don't ever talk to me, I'm a violent person who advocated the killing of all Zionists including civilians."

Talk show hosts occasionally approved of the killing of Jewish civilians or failed to distinguish between Jews and supporters of Israel in broadcasts aired during the conflict in Gaza. Private Salafist media sometimes included anti-Semitic programming that glorified or denied the Holocaust, including in interviews with academics and clerics. There were reports of imams using anti-Semitic rhetoric in their sermons, including allegations of blood libel.

On May 11, Coptic Pope Tawadros II described Jehovah's Witnesses as a "Zionist movement" in a televised interview. Following media reporting about Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1950s describing them as Zionists, the Ministry of Social Solidarity banned the group in 1960. The ban remained in effect despite multiple attempts by the Witnesses to have it lifted.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials at all levels of the U.S. government, including the President, Secretary of State, Charge d'Affaires, and other Department of State and embassy officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the government. These included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable. Officials also raised the ongoing discrimination Christians faced in building and maintaining church properties; official discrimination against Bahais; harassment of citizens whose religious views differed from the majority; restrictions on recognizing new religious groups; and the government's prohibition of conversion for Muslim citizens.

In September the President met with a delegation of Christian religious leaders from the Middle East, including Coptic Orthodox Bishop Angaelos. The President emphasized the United States recognizes the importance of the historic role of Christian communities and of protecting Christians and other religious minorities in the region. In his statement on the celebration of Coptic Christmas in January, the President reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to work for the protection of Christians and other people of faith in Egypt. During his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast in February, the President emphasized no society can truly succeed unless it guarantees the rights of all its peoples, including religious minorities, and mentioned Egypt's Coptic Christians as an example.

The Charge d'Affaires made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among members of all religious groups. In two September meetings with the grand mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa and the grand imam of Al-Azhar,

he emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. In an October meeting with a senior Coptic Orthodox bishop, the Charge reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to encouraging the government to improve the state of religious freedom in Egypt.

Embassy officers met regularly with officials in the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues. The embassy also regularly discussed religious freedom matters with other government officials, governors, and members of the NCHR.

Embassy officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahai communities, human rights groups, and other activists. They also discussed religious freedom matters with a range of individuals, including academics, business leaders, and citizens outside the capital area. Embassy officials actively challenged anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

The embassy supported the development of Arabic-language and English-language educational materials encouraging tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others. The embassy supported programs to promote tolerance among young religious leaders, interfaith understanding, and civic and political participation by marginalized youth. Embassy officials worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to support the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Countries

- [Egypt](#)

Topics

- [Abduction](#)
- [Ahmadis](#)
- [Anglican](#)
- [Baha'i](#)
- [Baptist](#)
- [Catholic](#)
- [Chaldean](#)
- [Christian](#)
- [Copts](#)
- [Episcopalian](#)
- [Freedom of religion](#)
- [Freedom of speech](#)
- [Jehovah's Witness](#)
- [Jew](#)
- [Maronite](#)
- [Mormon](#)
- [Muslim](#)

- [Orthodox Christian](#)
- [Pentecostal](#)
- [Presbyterian](#)
- [Protestant](#)
- [Religious discrimination](#)
- [Seventh Day Adventist](#)
- [Shia](#)
- [Sunni](#)