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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt

Executive Summary

The constitution describes freedom of belief as “absolute” and specifies Islam as the state religion. It also enshrines the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation, which local lawyers stated creates potential legal ambiguities with regard to the freedom of belief guaranteed in the constitution. The constitution only provides adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism the right to practice their religion freely and to build houses of worship. The government continued not to recognize and restrict Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Bahais. According to multiple sources, authorities continued to detain and physically mistreat former Muslims. Irrespective of religion, authorities also did not apply equal protection to all citizens and sometimes closed churches, in violation of the law, according to multiple sources. Courts charged citizens, including Muslim clerics, with “denigration of religions.” Christians reported discrimination by authorities, especially in rural areas. The government completed rebuilding 78 churches and other church-owned properties which had been destroyed or damaged in mob violence in 2013 and repaired Saints Peter and Paul Church in Cairo after a December 2016 suicide bombing that killed 29 people. It also issued an unprecedented civil marriage license to a Bahai couple with no religious affiliation designated on their national identity card. The government continued its efforts to preserve the nation’s Jewish heritage, including starting work to renovate and protect a historic synagogue in Alexandria. There were incidents of official anti-Semitism and public anti-Semitic statements by Al-Azhar, the country’s primary institution for spreading Islam and defending Islamic doctrine. According to religious leaders, educators, and families, the Ministry of Education made progress in removing language from school textbooks that it said could engender hate toward non-Muslims or promote the view that Islam was superior to other religions. The government-supported Islamic institutions Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta, the country’s fatwa issuing authority, continued to debate reforms to Islamic jurisprudence which mandates the death penalty for apostasy from Islam.

Societal violence connected with religion, including terrorist attacks, continued. An attack against a Sufi mosque in Rawda village in northern Sinai by armed gunmen carrying the ISIS flag killed 311 persons, 27 of whom were children, followed warnings not to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, according to press reports, and ISIS’s published threats against Sufis in December 2016. ISIS claimed responsibility for multiple attacks, including suicide bombings at two churches during Palm Sunday services that killed 45 people, the killing of 28 passengers on a bus carrying Christian

pilgrims to a desert monastery, and numerous killings of Christians in northern Sinai and elsewhere. Muslims opposed to church construction or renovation, even when legally authorized, continued to commit violence against churches and Christian-owned properties in various locales. Victims of sectarian violence continued to be pressured to drop charges in the spirit of “reconciliation” – a practice which human rights groups and Christians said regularly failed to hold the perpetrators accountable or provide justice to victims and their families. Muslims who openly left Islam were subjected to violence, threats, and abuse. Christians continued to face societal discrimination in their daily lives. Reports of incitement to violence against Jews and other anti-Semitic remarks, as well as defamatory speech against other minority religious groups, continued during the year.

U.S. representatives at multiple levels, including the Ambassador and Charge d’Affaires, visiting delegations from Washington, and embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. In meetings with high-level officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Justice, Awqaf (Islamic Endowments), and Interior, embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials 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, the rights of Shia Muslims to perform religious rituals publicly, and the discrimination and religious freedom violations resulting from official religious designations on national identity and other official documents. In December the embassy hosted a digital video conference with the State Department Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Central Asia for a discussion about religious freedom in the country. The embassy also promoted religious freedom on social media throughout the year. Embassy and consulate general 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. President Trump condemned the lethal attacks on the Rawda mosque in north Sinai and on the Mar Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Helwan, south of Cairo, and phoned President al-Sisi on both occasions, offering condolences and reiterating, “The United States will continue to stand with Egypt in the face of terrorism.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 97 million (July 2017 estimate). Most media reports state that approximately 90 percent of the population is officially designated as Sunni Muslims and approximately 10 percent is recognized as Christian (estimates range from 5 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 Anglican/Episcopalian and Protestant denominations, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Greek, Latin, and Syrian), and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) Churches. The Protestant community includes Apostolic

Grace, Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Baptists, Brethren, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Church of Christ, Faith (Al-Eyman), Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), Grace (An-Ni’ma), Independent Apostolic, Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala), Open Brethren, Pentecostal, Presbyterians, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), and Seventh-day Adventists. Jehovah’s Witnesses account for 1,000-1,500 people, according to media estimates, and there are also members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). 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.

Anecdotal estimates of the number of atheists range from one million to ten million. Absent official figures, sources consistently report that the number is increasing steadily. Estimates of the number of former Muslims who have quietly converted to other faiths – most often Christianity – range from 50,000 to four million.

Estimates regarding the number of Shia Muslims range from 800,000 to 2 million, according to media reports. There are also small groups of Quranist Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims.

The Jewish community is believed to number fewer than 25 persons, according to members of the community. According to a local Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO), there are six Jews in Cairo (all female). 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 Bohra Community, numbering approximately 550, 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. The constitution 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.

The constitution states that Al-Azhar is “the main authority in theology and Islamic affairs” and is responsible for spreading Islam, Islamic doctrine, and the Arabic language in the country and throughout the world. The president appoints the grand imam for life, choosing from among the institution’s Council of Senior Scholars, but lacks the authority to dismiss him. While the constitution declares Al-Azhar an independent

institution, its core funding comes from the government which is required by the constitution to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes.” Sources report that Al-Azhar’s donor funding – particularly from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – dwarfs the funding it receives from the government.

The constitution also 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. Individuals are subject to different sets of personal status laws (regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.), depending upon their official religious designation. The Ministry of Interior issues national identity cards that include official religious designations. Designations are limited to Muslim, Christian, or Jewish or a dash for citizens whose parents and grandparents were not members of those religions. Since the first use of the dash subsequent to a 2009 court order, Bahais are identified by a dash. The minister of interior has the authority to issue executive regulations determining what data should be provided on the card.

Neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit apostasy from Islam or efforts to proselytize Muslims. The law states individuals may change their religion. The government does recognize conversion from Islam for individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam, according to a Ministry of Interior decree pursuant to a court order. Reverting to Christianity requires presentation of a document from the receiving church, an identity card, and fingerprints. After a determination is made that the intent of the change – which often also entails a name change – is not to evade prosecution for a crime committed under the Muslim name, a new identity document will be issued with the Christian name and religious designation. 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, remain classified as Muslims.

Consistent with sharia, the law requires non-Muslim men to convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although Christian and Jewish women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men, and children from any unrecognized marriage are considered illegitimate. A married non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert. If a married man is discovered to have left Islam, his marriage to a woman whose official religious designation is Muslim is dissolved.

A divorced mother is entitled to custody of her son until the age of 10 and her daughter until age 12, unless one parent is Muslim and the other is not, in which case the Muslim parent is awarded custody.

The law generally follows sharia in matters of inheritance; a Muslim female heir generally receives half the amount of a male heir’s inheritance, and Christian widows of Muslim husbands have no inheritance rights. On January 3, however, an appellate court ruled that applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that the rules of the Christians and Jewish communities govern in personal status matters.

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 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 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 the law, penalties for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from the Ministry of Awqaf or Al-Azhar include a prison term of up to one year 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 ministry 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 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.

The law delegates authority to approve requests for church building and renovation permits to governors, rather than the president. The governor is to respond within four months; any refusal must include a written justification. The law does not provide for review or appeal of a refusal; nor does it specify recourse if a governor fails to respond

within the required timeframe. The law also includes provisions to legalize existing unlicensed churches and rescinds preconditions established in the 1930s. It stipulates that, while a request to license an existing building for use as a church is pending, the use of the building to conduct church services and rites may not be prevented. Under the law, the size of new churches depends on a government determination of the “number and need” of Christians in the area. New churches must also meet stringent land registration and building codes not required for mosques or for commercial or residential property.

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 a 2001 cabinet decree includes a provision requiring that new mosques built after that date must be a minimum distance of 500 meters (1600 feet) from the nearest other mosque. 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. Determinations of religious identity are based on official designations, not personal or parental decisions. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other. A common set of textbooks for these two courses is mandated for both public and private schools, including Christian-owned schools. Al-Azhar maintains a separate school system which serves some two million students from elementary through secondary school using its own separate curriculum.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion and defines it as including “any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to ... religion or belief.” The law 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 for 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 members of different denominations, or the individuals are not clearly a part of a religious group, the courts apply sharia.

Sharia provisions forbidding adoption apply to all citizens. The Ministry of Social Solidarity, however, manages a program entitled “Alternative Family” which recognizes permanent legal guardianship if certain requirements are met.

The National Council for Human Rights, 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 also is charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements pertaining to human rights. The council’s mandate includes investigating reports of alleged violations of religious freedom.

According to the constitution, “no political activity may be exercised or political parties formed on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect, or geographic location, nor may any activity be practiced that is hostile to democracy, secretive, or which possesses a military or quasi-military nature.”

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

Summary paragraph: Local officials sometimes did not apply equal protection to all citizens. Judges often cited sharia when ruling to restrict religious freedom, particularly for persons born to at least one Muslim parent. Authorities continued to deny individuals the right to change their official religious designation from Muslim to another religion and sometimes arrested those who had left Islam, according to multiple sources. Local authorities closed some churches because of threats of which church leaders said they were unaware, and others in response to attacks by Muslim neighbors. Local authorities also closed churches on the grounds that they were unlicensed, despite provisions in the law guaranteeing Christians the right to use the buildings for worship pending licensure. Two such churches were subsequently reopened. Government officials sometimes failed to protect minority victims of sectarian violence from intimidation by perpetrators demanding that the victims drop charges in a spirit of “reconciliation” rather than pursue justice through the court system. The government continued to prosecute individuals, including religious leaders, on charges of denigration of religions. The government also restricted the ability of citizens to carry out worship, marriage, educational, and other life activities of their choice. Dar al-Ifta and Al-Azhar undertook efforts to re-examine centuries-old Islamic jurisprudence mandating the death penalty for those who leave Islam. The Ministry of Education removed some language from school textbooks that was perceived as promoting hate and the superiority of Islam above all other religious beliefs and developed an all-new curriculum for a 12-year rollout beginning in fall 2018. Al-Azhar

University admitted its first non-Muslim student. For the first time, the government issued a civil marriage license to a Bahai couple. A court ruling permitted a Christian family to divide an inheritance according to Christian practices.

On August 21, National Security Service (NSS) officials arrested two atheists after their manager at La Poire, a pastry shop in New Cairo, notified authorities of a private message passed between the two that was critical of religion. The officials beat the two arrestees, according to sources familiar with the case, and then told inmates to beat them further.

On December 23, NSS officers arrested a 29-year-old man on charges of denigration of religions for allegedly administering a Facebook page entitled “Al Mulhedeem” (“The Atheists”) with more than 34,000 followers, according to press reports. The page, which allegedly questioned some Quranic verses and promoted the “Big Bang” theory of the origin of the universe, was no longer available after the arrest. North Giza Court subsequently ordered the man detained for 15 days pending investigation. Discussions about the rise of atheism in society continued through year’s end, both in parliament and in Islamic institutions, according to press reports.

In July a man who allegedly had converted from Islam to Christianity was brought to police by family members who said that he was an apostate from Islam and thereby guilty of denigration of religions, according to sources familiar with the case. Police reportedly interrogated him for four hours, then released him and told him to “disappear.” The man immediately relocated to a different residence. Some months later, a representative of the NSS summoned him to NSS headquarters where they detained and interrogated him for several nights before releasing him, according to sources.

In August police arrested and interrogated a man whom they alleged had converted from Islam to Christianity. Police released him, reportedly telling him he was too old to withstand the treatment they ordinarily would give to apostates from Islam, according to sources.

In December NSS officers informed family members of two former Muslims’ conversions to other faiths but did not make arrests. According to a source familiar with the case, this put at least one of the converts at risk; upon learning from the NSS about the conversion, a member of the convert’s family reportedly threatened to kill him if news of his conversion negatively affected the family member’s government job.

Courts continued to apply the penal code to prosecute those charged with denigrating Islam. On February 27, a court sentenced Muslim preacher Mohamed Abdullah Al Nasr, popularly known as Sheikh Mizo, to five years in prison and a fine of 10,000 EGP (\$560) for denigration of religions based on comments he made on social media questioning literal interpretations of Islamic texts and expressing doubt about the authenticity of others. An appeals court reduced the sentence to two years in prison and a fine of 1,000 EGP (\$56); subsequently the government waived the remainder of his sentence after he was included in a routine annual pardon. At year’s end, he was due for imminent release.

There were reports of government actions targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government had designated as a terrorist organization, and individuals associated with the group.

Authorities arrested and charged Bassem Abdel Malak Fahem with denigration of religions when, after terrorists attacked a bus and killed 28 Coptic Christian pilgrims in May, he posted pictures of well-known Islamic clerics on Facebook and accused them of inciting violence against Christians. Authorities arrested Abdel Malak in September, and they acquitted and released him in early November.

Also in May authorities charged former Under Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf Sheikh Salem Abdul Galeel with denigration of religions and undermining national unity after he appeared on his television program explaining verses from the Quran which described Jews and Christians as “*kuffar*” (infidels). Galeel told his audience that it was a disservice to Jews and Christians to assure them that they would go to paradise because the Quran was clear that they were *kuffar* and therefore would go to hell. Abdul Galeel also said Jewish and Christian scriptures had been corrupted. The television station canceled Galeel’s show and the Ministry of Awqaf banned him from preaching in mosques. Subsequently, the ministry demoted and banned from preaching Sheikh Abdullah Roshdy, an Al-Azhar scholar employed with the ministry, after he defended Abdul Galeel’s position. Other Muslim clerics called for respectful debate of intellectual and doctrinal issues, rather than criminal charges. A court released Galeel on bail; subsequently the complainant dropped the case, according to press reports.

On June 16, authorities charged Coptic Orthodox priest Makary Younan with denigration of religions, discrimination against a specific group, disturbing peace and order in the country, exploiting religion to spread thoughts that aim to stir strife and insult divine religions, and harming national unity and social coherence after he stated in a sermon that, according to both Islamic and non-Islamic historical sources, the country had a Christian majority until it was defeated by a Muslim army. A court released Makary on bail; subsequently the complainant dropped the case, according to press reports. On May 16, authorities arrested three Christians in El-Zawya El-Hamra for trying to stop local authorities from carrying out a demolition order against a Coptic Church-owned building based on an anonymous complaint that it was being used as a church, according to press reports. Authorities halted demolition when Church leaders, who had been using the building for a charity clinic and other social services for local residents, presented ownership papers and stated that they intended to include the site on the list to be presented to the government for licensure in accordance with the Church Construction Law. Authorities subsequently released the three Christians.

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, including by closing churches in violation of the law on church construction. According to a report by one human rights organization, there were at least 19 cases of assault or sectarian tensions relating to church buildings and the holding of church services during the year, most of which were led by security

officials on the grounds the buildings being used were unlicensed. These actions led to the closure of at least eight active churches during the year, the report said. According to press reports, more than 60 churches remained closed at year’s end.

On March 5, security forces closed a church in Ezbet El-Nakhl village in Minya, telling members of the community that closing the church was a security precaution against an attack by Islamic extremists, according to news outlets. Subsequently, Minya Province Security Chief Faisal Dweidar denied that there was a threat to the church and stated that it was closed for lack of proper licensing, the same news outlet reported.

In July security forces closed a church in the town of Kidwan, Minya Province, citing alleged complaints by local residents that the church was not licensed, according to press reports. A local bishop told the press that the 1,300 Christians of Kidwan had no other place to pray and denied that Muslim neighbors had complained about the church. He further stated that at least 15 churches in the surrounding towns remained closed and some 70 towns remained without a church despite having applied for building licenses. After Christians in Kidwan appealed to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the church reopened on September 10.

On August 20, security forces closed Virgin Mary Church, located in what was once a private home in the town of Ezbat al-Forn, also in Minya Province. A senior police officer told the press that security forces had intervened to disperse a clash between the town’s Muslim and Christian residents regarding some Muslims’ objections to Christians conducting worship services in the building. Christians denied that there had been clashes and conducted worship services in the street the same day and during the next two days without incident. Christians of Ezbat al-Forn appealed to President Sisi; subsequently their church also reopened on September 10.

Authorities in Minya Province closed four churches in October and assailants attacked three others there, according to media reports. Local residents reportedly pressured Christians to agree that the churches would remain closed until permits could be obtained and that no one would be held accountable for the attacks.

On October 15, Christians reopened the Church of the Virgin in the town of Sheikh Alaa in Minya Province, which had been closed by officials after it was attacked by local Muslim residents in 2015; however, security officials closed the church again on the same day due to security concerns for worshippers after local residents harassed some of them, according to a statement by the local bishop. In his statement, the bishop explained that officials did not take action to reopen the church after the first attack and routinely responded to harassment of worshippers by closing down churches.

On October 22, security officials closed a church in the town of al-Qushairy in Minya Province after four Christians were injured by people throwing stones, according to the local bishop’s statement. The authorities issued arrest warrants for 11 suspects in connection with the attacks, according to the local governor. The bishop, however, reported that since agreement had been reached between the parties, no charges were filed against the perpetrators, but the church remained closed.

Also on October 22, security officials closed Abu Sayfen Church in the town of al-Karm in Minya Province over reports of a planned attack against the church; however, the local bishop stated that there had been no complaints about the church. The governor of Minya Province subsequently affirmed that there had been no attack and no arrest warrants had been issued. On October 27, security officials closed Mar Gerges Church (Saint George) in Ezbet Zakaria, also in Minya Province, after a Christian woman was injured in an attack on the church. The attack occurred the same day that local residents were pressuring Christians to agree, in the name of “reconciliation,” that the churches would remain closed, media reported. According to the local governor, 15 suspects were arrested for the attack.

The governor of Minya affirmed in an October 29 statement to the press that security officials were closing churches because they were “unlicensed houses” which lacked authorization required to perform religious rites, in spite of a provision in the law guaranteeing Christians the right to continue using unlicensed churches pending regularization of their status. He also announced on or about November 29 that he had granted permits for 21 churches to be restored, expanded, or rebuilt. World Watch Monitor, an organization that reports on Christians under pressure for their faith, said some of the applications for those permits were reportedly submitted more than 20 years ago.

On September 26, pursuant to the law, church leaders submitted to government authorities lists of more than 3,700 unlicensed churches and other church-affiliated properties for which they desired legal recognition. According to sources, a government administrator connected with the committee to review applications for licenses rejected at least 27 of these churches on the grounds that they had been inactive for more than five years, in compliance with the law. The sources stated, however, that the reason for their inactivity was that authorities had closed them.

In September the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) banned Dr. Sabri Abdel Raouf, Al-Azhar professor of comparative Islamic jurisprudence, from television and radio after he responded to a request for a fatwa on necrophilia by stating that, although any normal human being would find the practice repugnant, nothing in Islamic doctrine specifically prohibited “farewell intercourse” with the corpse of one’s recently-deceased wife. Al-Azhar University president Dr. Mohammed Al Mahrasawi referred Raouf for investigation and possible disciplinary actions, stating, “speaking of these types of fatwas should be limited in order to protect Al-Azhar and Islam.”

Al Mahrasawi also referred Dr. Suad Saleh, Al-Azhar professor of Islamic studies and former dean of the Women’s College, for investigation and possible disciplinary action after she appeared on television and responded to Raouf’s fatwa. Subsequently on October 17, the outcome document of a conference on fatwas hosted by Dar al-Ifta recommended adopting legislation to regulate the issuance of fatwas.

On November 15, Chairman of the SCMR Makram Mohammed Ahmed announced in a press conference at SCMR headquarters that all media outlets would be prohibited from featuring any mufti (a Muslim scholar specifically qualified to issue a fatwa) except 50 named individuals approved by Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta. Observers said that there

were hundreds of muftis in the country authorized to issue fatwas. “Freedom of expression in religious issues is not included in religious advisory activity,” Ahmed stated.

In December the Administrative Control Authority referred Samir Hashish, a Muslim scholar affiliated with Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Complex, to court on charges of inciting sectarianism after videos circulated online of the preacher presenting what he said was longstanding doctrinal evidence that, while Islam sanctioned the death penalty for murder, it did not sanction the death penalty for a Muslim who had killed a non-Muslim because the blood of a non-Muslim was not equal to that of a Muslim.

Television host Islam El-Beheiry, who received a presidential pardon in 2016 after he was jailed for “defaming religious symbols” by criticizing traditional Islamic teachings and texts, including some which called for violence, produced and broadcast 25 television episodes during the year and continued to host a radio program entitled Free Islam. On October 29, an administrative court banned Beheiry’s previous show, *Ma’a Islam*, from all satellite channels, pursuant to a 2015 lawsuit filed by Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, which accused the show of violating the law on denigration of religions. The order did not ban Beheiry’s other ongoing programming.

The government did not prevent Bahais, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses from worshiping privately in small numbers. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the government engaged in surveillance and frequent home visits during which members were interrogated and sometimes threatened. The NSS also summoned members to their offices for interrogations. The government continued to ban the importation and sale of Bahai and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature and to authorize customs officials to confiscate their personally owned religious materials. In July NSS officers stopped two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Beni Suef, confiscating religious materials from the two individuals as well as from two other Jehovah’s Witnesses who arrived later.

On July 27, authorities issued a civil marriage license to a Bahai couple with no religious designation listed who had sued for that right, thus enabling them to change their marital status on national identity cards and other documentation. With the exception of that couple, national identity cards continued to list married Bahais as “single,” which some Bahai women with children said invoked a sense of embarrassment and public shame, in addition to creating difficulties obtaining proper documentation and services for their children. At year’s end, standardized procedures for issuing civil marriage licenses to couples with no religious affiliation designated had not been developed.

The government closed the tomb of Imam Al-Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, located inside Al-Hussein Mosque in Old Cairo, during the three-day commemoration of Ashura, which was described in multiple news reports as an attempt to discourage Shia Muslim gatherings. The main area of the mosque remained open; only the room containing the shrine was closed.

On January 24, President Sisi, addressing the country’s high divorce rate and its impact on families, called for an amendment of divorce laws. He called for an end to verbal divorce and suggested that divorce should come into effect only after being

documented by authorized marriage officiants. Two weeks later, Al-Azhar rejected the proposed amendment as “contradicting sharia” and suggested, “those who deal lightly with divorce fatwas ... had better divert their efforts to serve the people and solve their problems in real life.” Subsequently, the government dropped the proposed change.

After an ISIS-affiliated suicide bomber killed 29 people in a December 2016 attack against Saints Peter and Paul Church in Cairo, the army repaired the damage in time for Coptic Orthodox Christmas on January 7, as ordered by President Sisi.

In response to this and other terrorist attacks, the government stationed security officers outside of churches. Some officers lost their lives defending churches, including seven who were killed in April when a terrorist detonated his suicide vest outside a metal detector after being refused entry into the church where, had he been granted entry, reports said he would have killed many more. Another security officer was killed defending Mar Mina Church in Helwan in a December terrorist attack which killed at least nine people. At the same time, according to sources, in some cases officers only checked national identity cards and denied entry to churches to anyone officially designated as Muslim, allegedly on the order of the Ministry of Interior. Sources said this diminished the opportunity for converts from Islam to attend church services, both by barring them entry and by requiring them to take the added risk of revealing themselves to security officers as likely converts.

In September the government announced the completion of the rebuilding, primarily at government expense, of 78 church properties throughout the country that had been damaged or destroyed by Muslim Brotherhood supporters in 2013. Construction progressed on a state-funded church in al-Our village in Minya Province in honor of 20 Copts beheaded by an ISIS affiliate in Libya.

The Ministry of Awqaf launched a program training female Muslim preachers (250 according to the most recent information), some of whom were deployed alongside Christian nuns to different communities as part of an interfaith dialogue campaign, according to ministry officials.

In response to President al-Sisi’s continuing calls for Islamic scholars to renew religious discourse and challenge the ideology of extremists, the Ministry of Education issued new textbooks for use in public and private schools. While most passages perceived as promoting hate and the superiority of one religion over all others had been removed, some passages continued to draw complaints from religious leaders, educators, and families. For example, some textbooks mandated for Arabic language class, a secular subject required for students of all religious backgrounds, contained multiple Quranic verses, generally preceded by “God the Most High says ... ” Some lessons in these textbooks teach Islam; for example, a fifth-grade Arabic language textbook read, “peace will not be achieved on earth except by following God’s regime as contained in the Quran and Sunna (example) of Muhammad,” and “not following the rules of God will lead to great punishment.” Parents and educators also expressed concerns about history textbooks; however, Ministry of Education representatives stated that history

curricula were being updated as well. Sources reported difficulties obtaining Al-Azhar approval for proposed updates to the curriculum used in public and private schools. Al-Azhar approval is required for all curriculum changes in all the country's schools.

Al-Azhar also announced that it was updating classroom textbooks for use in its own K-12 school system; however, sources said that teachers continued to rely primarily on historical doctrinal texts for religious studies rather than prepared textbooks. In addition, the committee overseeing curriculum development continued to reject much of the proposed new content, according to a member of the committee who was quoted in press reports. In some cases, the content being rejected was identical to statements Al-Azhar itself had published on its website, according to press reports.

The Ministry of Education also developed a new curriculum for a rollout beginning with incoming kindergarten and first grade students in the fall of 2018 with the next year's curriculum to be added each year. According to ministry sources, respect for human rights and religious tolerance was woven into the new curriculum. The ministry also continued to update the existing curriculum, which it expected would take 12 years to phase out completely.

All 27 of the country's governors, appointed by the president, were Muslim. As of the end of the year, the cabinet contained one Christian, the minister of immigration and expatriate affairs. Christians remained underrepresented in the military and security services. Christians admitted at the entry level seldom were promoted into the upper ranks of government entities, according to sources.

Children of families who self-identified as Christians but legally identified as Muslims 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 or live with Christian foster parents. In March authorities forcibly removed a three-year-old orphan from the home of a Christian family who had taken him in from the street, according to an individual familiar with the case. Authorities placed him in an orphanage for Muslim children, stating that under sharia any child in a Muslim-majority land whose religion is unknown is presumed Muslim, even if non-Muslims live in the land, and that Muslim children were not permitted to be raised by non-Muslims. Children designated as Muslim also had no recourse to choose their religion when they reached legal age. This restricted their ability to marry; for example, young women legally designated as Muslim but self-identifying as Christian were not permitted to marry Christian men.

According to the academic community, no Christians served as presidents of the country's 25 public universities. On December 25, Cairo University announced the appointment of a Christian dean. In September Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with both religious and nonreligious programs of study, accepted its first non-Muslim student into its Department of Dentistry. The government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers, stating as its reason that the curriculum involved study of the Quran.

Reports of anti-Semitism continued, including in public statements by government-supported Al-Azhar. In a May 5 interview with television station Channel 1, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar said it was the Jews who had started the animosity with the Muslims “by rejecting the message of the Prophet Muhammad.” He stated the Jews of Medina and other towns in the Arabian Peninsula “took actual measures to thwart, kill, and bury the Islamic call in its infancy,” and, after 1,400 years, Muslims “still suffer from Zionist-Jewish interference in the affairs of the Muslims.”

A member of parliament, in arguing against requiring Muslim women to wear the *niqab*, told press that it was of Jewish origin, and chairman of the parliament’s Human Rights Committee Alaa Abed said that a Human Rights Watch report on torture in the country’s jails was funded by “the Zionist Lobby.”

The government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country on condition they not proselytize to Muslims; however, some religious workers were denied visas or refused entry upon arrival without explanation, according to sources. 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.

The government continued its efforts to digitize historical records of births, marriages, deaths, and other community records of the greatly diminished Jewish community whose membership in the 1950s exceeded 75,000 people. The Ministry of Antiquities, charged with preserving the country’s heritage, continued to assess Jewish heritage sites and to catalogue their contents and to fund and oversee restoration of the large Nebi Daniel Synagogue in Alexandria. Most of the country’s other synagogues, as well as a millennium-old Jewish cemetery in Cairo, continued to deteriorate from decades of disuse and neglect.

In February the Council of Protestant Churches submitted a request to the government to permit both adoption and equal inheritance as part of the package of personal status laws applied to its members.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Summary paragraph: Lethal violence connected with religion continued. A gang of armed terrorists carrying an ISIS flag attacked a Sufi mosque in Northern Sinai during Friday prayers, killing 311 persons, including 27 children. ISIS claimed responsibility for multiple other attacks, including suicide bombings against two churches during Palm Sunday services, attacks against passengers on a bus carrying Christian pilgrims, and a spate of attacks on individual Christians in northern Sinai and elsewhere. An assailant killed a Coptic Orthodox priest in Cairo and injured another; a court sentenced the assailant to death for murder. According to press reports, three noncommissioned officers and a security guard allegedly tortured and killed a Christian police conscript. His family reported in a videotaped interview that he was “tortured and killed for his faith.” Families, employers, neighbors, local police, and national security officials subjected former Muslims, including those who became atheists as well as those who

converted to other faiths, to violence, threats, and abuse. The construction of churches continued to meet societal resistance, including acts of violence and destruction of property in some cases. Reports of abductions targeting Christians, religious discrimination, and defamatory speech against Jews, Christians, and Shia Muslims continued.

On November 24, at least 25 armed assailants attacked the Sufi mosque of Al-Rawda village in North Sinai during Friday prayers, killing 311 persons, including 27 children, and injuring at least 122, according to press reports. According to a statement by government officials, the assailants opened fire at the worshippers from the mosque's windows using automatic machine guns. The assailants then took up ambush positions and opened fire at ambulances arriving at the scene. The attackers raised the ISIS flag, according to government officials and eyewitnesses quoted in press accounts, although by year's end no group had claimed responsibility. ISIS previously had denounced Sufis as apostates from Islam and threatened to kill them, mentioning Sufis in the town of Rawda specifically. The military launched air strikes against the gunmen's vehicles during the attack, according to a statement by the military spokesman, and subsequently destroyed a number of terrorist hideouts.

On April 9, twin suicide bombings at Coptic Orthodox churches killed 45 people during Palm Sunday services. One struck St. Mark's Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Alexandria, where Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II was leading the service. The attacker detonated a bomb at the gate of the church compound after being refused entry by security. The other attack occurred in the city of Tanta in the Nile delta, where a suicide bomber detonated himself among the front pews of the church. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks and warned Muslims to avoid Christian gatherings in Egypt. The government referred 48 persons to a military court for suspected involvement in these and the December 2016 attack against a Coptic Orthodox church in Cairo, as well as on suspicion of membership in ISIS terrorist cells. President al-Sisi also declared a state of emergency on April 9 after the Palm Sunday attacks and instructed all churches to cancel all activities other than regular church services for a period of three months.

On May 26, gunmen dressed in military fatigues and posing as security officers waved down a bus carrying Christian pilgrims on a highway in Minya Province and ordered the passengers to exit the bus, according to survivors of the attack. After separating the men from the women and children, they ordered the men to recite the *shahada* (the Islamic creed: "There is no god but God and Mohammad is the messenger of God") and thus become Muslims. When the men refused, the gunmen opened fire, killing 28. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.

On December 29, an ISIS gunman opened fire as congregants exited after services at Mar Mina Church in Helwan killing seven, including a Muslim police officer who was stationed outside the church, and injuring five, according to press reports. He also attacked a nearby shop, killing two other Christians. According to a statement by the Ministry of Interior, the attacker was wearing a suicide vest and attempted to enter the church, but was prevented by police.

Terrorists affiliated with ISIS carried out a series of attacks against Christians in northern Sinai after having issued videos and other public statements calling on pious Muslims to kill them. On January 30, masked assailants shot Coptic Christian Wael Milad in his shop, according to press reports. Eyewitnesses told media outlets that on February 11 an attacker shot Christian veterinarian Bahgat William in the head, neck, and stomach as he was leaving his clinic. Attackers killed Adel Showky on the same day in al-Arish's Samaran neighborhood, according to press reports. On February 16, two assailants on a motorbike gunned down Coptic Christian schoolteacher Gamal Tawfiq as he was walking through a crowded marketplace between his home and school, according to press reports. On February 22, the corpses of two local Christians, Saad Hanna and his son Medhat, were found on the roadside in al-Arish. Saad's body showed gunshot wounds; Medhat's showed signs of having been burned alive, according to press reports. Following these attacks and additional threats, hundreds of Christians fled Sinai during the first several months of the year for other parts of Egypt, according to press and church sources. According to an international NGO, several families told human rights activists they wanted to return to their homes, but were skeptical that this would be possible. Subsequently on May 6, gunmen shot and killed Nabeel Saber Ayoub, a Copt who had fled al-Arish with his family but returned briefly to complete school paperwork for his son and to check on his house and barber shop, according to press reports.

Violent attacks against individual Christians were not limited to northern Sinai; however, it was uncertain in some cases if there was a religious motivation. In Cairo on January 16, Ishak Younan was discovered in his apartment with his throat slit. According to press, there was no sign of struggle and his wallet still contained cash. Police arrested two suspects. On January 14, an attacker stabbed Christian physician Bassam Zaki in the neck, chest, and back in his apartment in Dayrout City. On January 6, Eastern Orthodox Christmas Eve, a killer slit the throats and killed a Christian couple, Gamal Fadlallah, and his wife Nadia Amin, in their beds in the village of Tokh-Dalka in Menoufia Province. On January 3, an assailant slit the throat of Christian shop owner Youssef Lamei while the victim was sitting outside of his store in Alexandria. The assailant confessed that he had killed the shopkeeper for selling alcohol after having previously warned him that this was against Islam. On March 9, a court ordered the death sentence for the attacker; an appeal remained pending at year's end.

On December 22, Muslim residents in Atfih, a suburb of Cairo, gathered after Friday prayer and attacked Al-Amir Tadros Church, destroying its contents, calling for the church to be demolished, and wounding three Christians after a rumor circulated that Christians intended to install a bell, according to press reports and other sources. Police dispersed the mob and arrested 15 of the attackers on charges of illegal assembly, thuggery, vandalism, assault, and using religion to stir sectarian strife. Police also arrested the 62-year-old former owner of the church building on charges of construction without a permit, according to press reports. A local rights activist reported that the church had been operating for 15 years and that church authorities had requested it be licensed in keeping with the 2016 Church Construction Law. At year's end, all suspects remained in custody.

On July 19, Christian police conscript Josef Reda Helmy was tortured and killed at Mubarak Training Camp in Cairo, according to press reports. His family said that Helmy was killed because of Christian symbols tattooed on his arm. A military prosecutor held three noncommissioned officers and one security guard for 15 days in connection with the case. The four defendants said they had acted under the order of Officer Mohammed Tork who, as of year's end, had not been charged.

On October 12, Semaan Shehata, a Coptic Orthodox priest from Beni Suef, was stabbed to death in the Cairo suburb El-Salaam City, and a cross was carved on his forehead. Authorities arrested Ahmed El-Sonbaty; on November 15, a court sentenced him to death for murder, according to media reports. At year's end, the case was scheduled to be appealed. Sheikh Samir Hashish, a Muslim cleric, stated that according to longstanding Islamic jurisprudence, the blood of the *kuffar* was not equal to that of Muslims; therefore, the death penalty should not be imposed on the Muslim who killed the priest. Coptic Orthodox religious leaders appealed to the government to change “the culture of a nation poisoned by extremism,” media reported. During a television interview, Father Saleeb Abdel Shahid, Shehata's father-in-law, said that these conditions for Christians could not continue, adding that priests needed to feel safe in their own country. The assailant reportedly also injured a second priest, Benjamin Moftah, during the same attack.

Societal abuses against former Muslims continued. In May a young man in Cairo committed suicide after his family locked him inside the house for more than two years for being an atheist, according to sources. In July a 20-year-old Cairo resident was forced to flee when his brother threatened to kill him after learning that he had converted from Islam to Christianity, according to sources familiar with the case. In March a young woman living in Cairo was threatened by her brother and uncle who said they would kill her for her conversion from Islam to Christianity, according to sources familiar with the case. Another young woman from northern Egypt reportedly spent three months in jail under false charges filed by her family when they discovered she had converted to Christianity, according to sources familiar with the case. Another reportedly fled and lived in hiding after her family sent her to a psychiatric ward for being “confused about religion.” Christian couples from Muslim backgrounds reported that if their children revealed to teachers, classmates, or relatives that a religion other than Islam was being practiced in the home, this could put the entire family at risk. One such couple reported that, because of this risk, they did not plan to have children.

In April Muslims in Kom al-Loufi village in Minya Province attacked the Christian community after services celebrating Holy Thursday which had been held in a Christian-owned home with the verbal approval of police, according to press reports, since the church remained closed by authorities. The assailants set fire to three Christian-owned homes and injured four persons. Police arrested 15 individuals. Subsequently Muslim residents gathered a second time and threw rocks at Christian-owned homes, in spite of the presence of security forces, according to press reports, leading to another 15 arrests. On April 21, Christian residents issued a statement that police had failed to keep a promise to allow them to use their church or, alternatively, to build a new church on land they had purchased on the outskirts of town; that pressure from extremists was impeding their access to churches in neighboring villages; and in spite of the recent

arrests and presence of security, Muslim residents continued to prevent them from gathering for prayer. They demanded that the legal and constitutional rights of Christians be protected and that the perpetrators of the attacks be brought to justice, and called on President al-Sisi to intervene. In December Christian families withdrew charges against 23 suspects in a 2016 case in which assailants had attacked Christians and Christian-owned properties in the same village. Some human rights activists stated that the Christian families withdrew their complaints in fear of a backlash if the suspects were sentenced; others reported that they did so after the local Muslim community and security agencies entered into a verbal agreement to allow them to build a church on the outskirts of town.

Police responded swiftly to reports of sectarian violence on March 24 in the village of al-Mohayadet, near Luxor, when Muslims from four villages converged on a gated compound containing five Christian-owned homes, according to press reports. The crowd demanded the release of an 18-year-old woman, saying she had converted to Islam and married a 19-year-old Muslim who was unable to provide documentation of the marriage. The woman's family had fled with their daughter ten days earlier, according to a source familiar with the case, saying the man had tried to attack their daughter. Police used tear gas to disburse the crowd; four police and seven protesters were injured in the clashes.

In contrast to preceding years, the Coptic Orthodox Church refused to participate in government-sponsored “customary reconciliation” as a substitute to the rule of law to address attacks on Christians and their churches. Human rights groups and Christians said that practice constituted an encroachment on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship, 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. “Reconciliation” sessions had been held under the auspices of the Egyptian Family House, a body consisting of Muslim and Christian clerics.

In some cases intimidation in the name of “reconciliation” continued, however. For example, Souad Thabet, an elderly Coptic woman, and other Coptic witnesses to an attack she and other Copts suffered, retracted their testimonies under pressure and threats by local residents, sources reported. In 2016, 300 Muslim residents of the village of El-Karm in Minya Province set fire to several Christian owned homes and stripped Thabet naked after a rumor spread that her son was having an affair with a married Muslim woman. The case remained pending at the end of the year; however, government officials report a lack of evidence after the woman and witnesses retracted their testimony. Thabet's son and the woman with whom he allegedly had an affair were each sentenced to two years in prison for adultery.

While kidnappers targeted both Muslims and Christians during the year, sources reported cases of police failing to assist Christian parents in recovering their minor daughters who had been kidnapped by or eloped with Muslim men. In one case, a girl's parents identified the perpetrator and provided police with his address but police still took no action, according to an individual familiar with the case. One father agreed to prosecutors' request to drop charges against a Muslim man in order to recover his 14-year-old daughter, according to a source familiar with the case. One activist stated that

Christian parents often dropped charges because the court had the authority to place an underage girl in an orphanage pending investigation, which could last until the daughter's 18th birthday. World Watch Monitor published an interview with a man who said he was a former Muslim who had convinced a series of Christian girls to elope with him. According to the article, he said he had received money for each girl from “Salafist networks” whose aim was “to strengthen Islam and weaken Christianity.” An activist who tracks abduction and elopement cases reported several cases of minor Christian girls eloping with Muslim men during the year.

On May 3, Director of Ibn Taymiyyah Academy for Theological and Epistemological Research Mohamed Soliman filed a lawsuit against the country's theater troupe, accusing them of denigrating Islam in a play about a man from seventh-century Mecca who rejected Islam. The sketch ended with the lead actor saying, “Today, wine and women. And tomorrow, we kill Muhammad, peace be upon him.” A group of actors answered, “Peace be upon him.”

On December 25, the president of Cairo University announced the appointment of a Christian as dean. Regular discrimination in private hiring continued, however, including in professional sports, according to human rights groups and religious communities. Discrimination also occurred against Muslims. In late November a Christian landlord told his tenants that their roommate had to vacate the premises by the end of the month after seeing his national identity card listing him as Muslim, according to sources. Sources also reported widespread religious discrimination in the workplace against persons officially designated as Muslim who declined invitations to participate in communal Islamic prayers or who broke the Ramadan fast.

Islamic groups continued to use discriminatory speech against Christians, and terrorists called for Christians to be killed. For example, on February 20, terrorists affiliated with ISIS released a 20-minute video claiming responsibility for the December 2016 attack on Saints Peter and Paul Church in Cairo, calling for the killing of Christians, saying they were the “favorite prey” of the mujahideen, and adding that Copts were “warriors of the Crusaders.”

In response to ISIS' statement listing names of Muslim clerics whom they accused of apostasy from Islam and calling on pious Muslims to kill them, Al-Azhar's Observatory, established in 2015 to monitor extremist rhetoric, issued a statement on February 21 criticizing the group for equating the blood of Muslim clerics with the blood of non-Muslims.

After the Palm Sunday church bombings in Alexandria and Tanta, Muslim preacher Wagdi Ghoneim, a Salafi imam living in exile in Qatar, broadcast a video stating that Coptic Christians “deserved” what they got, saying the bombing was punishment for Christians' support for President al-Sisi, one of a series of videos he produced calling for the killing of Coptic Christians, condemning al-Sisi as an apostate from Islam, and calling for the overthrow of the government. A court sentenced Ghoneim to death in absentia on April 30 for “creating a terrorist cell.”

Reports of societal anti-Semitism and incitement to commit violence against Jews

continued, particularly by Muslim clerics.

On March 27, Sheikh Abd Al-Wahhab Al-Maligi, a Muslim cleric, appeared on Al-Seha wa Al-Jamal TV defending female genital mutilation and said that Jews had been the first to criticize the practice because they did “not want Islam or the Muslims to be pure, developed, and civilized.” He pointed to the debunked *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as support for his argument.

On July 20, Al-Azhar University professor of Islamic law Ahmed Karima appeared on Palestinian television calling for armed jihad against the “Zionist gang” who were “raised on aggression, theft, and plundering,” and encouraged armed jihad against Jews.

In videotaped sermons on August 4 and August 11, Muslim cleric Sayed Ahmed Ali cited a *hadith* (tradition) quoting the Prophet Muhammad saying, “Judgment Day will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews. The Muslims will kill them, and the Jews will hide behind trees and rocks, but the trees and rocks will call: ‘Oh, Muslim, oh servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!’” Sayed subsequently cried out, “Oh, Allah, bring us that day of battle with the Jews! Bring us that day of battle with the Jews!”

Following the President’s announcement recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, some newspapers published anti-Semitic editorial cartoons suggesting Jewish and Israeli domination of U.S. policies and politics. Copies of anti-Semitic literature, including translations of *Mein Kampf*, were widely available for purchase.

Anti-Shia rhetoric continued as well. On February 11, cleric Muhammad Al-Zoghbi called Shia Muslims “criminal *rafidites*,” (a slur for Shia, meaning “rejectionists”) for killing Sunnis in Iraq and Syria in an interview televised on Al-Rahma TV. “I tell you, these are filthy people! They are nothing like the Sunnis,” he said after recounting a story he said he had heard about Ayatollah Khomeini allegedly having sex with a five-year-old girl and later justifying the act as permitted in Islam.

Sunni cleric Sameh Abdel Hameed Hamouda called on the government to demolish the Al-Hussein mosque in Cairo, the shrine believed by many to contain the head of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Imam Al-Hussein, a revered figure for Shia Muslims. Sameh accused Shia of lying about the presence of the relic in an effort to “exploit this mosque to spread Shiism and invade Egypt with their heresies and deviations,” adding, “ignorant people come to this shrine to practice all types of polytheism and heresies.”

In December lawyer and frequent talk show guest Nabih al-Wahsh called for women to be raped if they did not comply with traditional Islamic standards of modesty. The National Security Emergency Misdemeanor Court subsequently sentenced him to three years in jail on charges of threatening public order and security, as well as incitement to harm citizens.

During a televised talk show, the president of a Coptic human rights organization, Naguib Gabriel, called in and described Jehovah’s Witnesses as Zionists and called on all of the country’s Christians not to invite Jehovah’s Witnesses into their homes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Ambassador, the Charge d'Affaires, and other Department of State, embassy, and consulate general officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education as well as with members of parliament, governors, and representatives of Islamic institutions, church communities, and religious minority groups. President Trump condemned the lethal attacks on the Rawda mosque in North Sinai and on the Mar Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Helwan and phoned President al-Sisi on both occasions, offering condolences and reiterating, “The United States will continue to stand with Egypt in the face of terrorism.”

In January embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Awqaf, and Education as well as with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and a number of human rights activists and religious and community leaders. Washington, D.C.-based U.S. government officials visited the country to promote religious freedom in October. Issues raised included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable; failed to protect victims of sectarian attacks from intimidation; prosecuted individuals for religious defamation; enabled religious discrimination by means of official religious designations including on national identity cards; and failed to recognize conversion of Muslim-born citizens. Embassy representatives also met with leading religious figures, including the Grand Mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa, the Coptic Orthodox Pope, other leading Christian clergy, and representatives of the Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahai communities as well as atheists and former Muslims who had converted to Christianity. In December the embassy hosted a digital video conference with the State Department Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Central Asia for a discussion about religious freedom in the country. The embassy also promoted religious freedom on social media throughout the year. The U.S. government closely monitored foreign organizations for possible terrorist activity; during the reporting period, the Muslim Brotherhood did not meet U.S. statutory criteria to be designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

U.S. officials emphasized to the country's officials the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of cases, including attacks on Christians, recognition of Bahais and Jehovah's Witnesses, the rights of Shia to publicly perform religious rituals, and problems resulting from government-designated religious identities listed on official documents which in some cases facilitated religious discrimination and, particularly in cases of converts from Islam, led to abuses including violence. 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 and 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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