

Document #2051546

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt

Executive Summary

The constitution states, “Freedom of belief is absolute” and “The freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine [i.e., Abrahamic] religions is a right regulated by law.” The constitution states citizens “are equal before the law” and criminalizes discrimination and “incitement to hatred” based upon “religion, belief, sex, origin, race...or any other reason.” The constitution also states, “Islam is the religion of the state...and the principles of Islamic sharia are the main sources of legislation.” The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and allows only their adherents to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. On February 24, the government executed eight men at Borg al-Arab Prison in Alexandria for their role in attacks on churches in Alexandria and Tanta on Palm Sunday, 2017, that resulted in 88 deaths. On June 2, the Giza Criminal Court sentenced seven defendants to 15 years’ imprisonment each for setting fire to the Kafr Hakim Church in Kerdasa in Giza Governorate in 2013. On December 6, a Cairo court extended the detention of Coptic rights advocate Ramy Kamel Saied. In September, press and NGOs reported that police detained Quranist Reda Abdel-Rahman, a teacher in Kafr Saqr in Sharqia Governorate, on charges of joining ISIS, adopting *takfiri* extremist ideas, and promoting those ideas in print, reportedly based on papers seized from his residence at the time of his August 22 arrest. Authorities renewed Abdel-Rahman’s detention on December 31. On June 21, the Economic Misdemeanor Appeals Court in Alexandria rejected an appeal submitted on behalf of atheist activist and blogger Anas Hassan to a February 27 verdict and upheld his sentence of three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 Egyptian pounds (\$19,100) for managing “The Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page. On June 27, a court in Mashtoul al-Souk in Sharqia Governorate sentenced two men to one year in prison each on charges of “contempt of religions” for spreading and promoting Shia Islam. On February 23, an administrative court ordered all Shia websites and television channels closed, including the well-known website elnafisbook.com, which belongs to Shia activist Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis, a professor who converted from Sunni to Shia Islam. Under a 2016 law issued to legalize unlicensed churches and facilitate the construction of new churches, the government reported having approved 478 applications for legalization for churches and related buildings during the year, resulting in a total of 1,800 buildings legally registered since the law’s enactment in 2017. According to a report issued by the media center of the cabinet, the government allocated lands to build 10 new churches in eight cities. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) continued to issue required certifications for Sunni imams and to register and license all mosques. In a June 28 cabinet meeting, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said the government should give “the highest priority to spreading awareness among students of the principles of religion, including freedom of belief.”

Press and NGOs reported that a fight broke out between Muslims and Christians in Dabbous in Minya Governorate on October 3 during a Coptic wedding that led to further violence two days later. Police arrested 12 individuals from both sides. Newspapers reported that a crowd of Muslims attacked Christian homes and a church in the village of al-Barsha in Minya on November 25 after rumors circulated that a local Christian man uploaded posts to social media viewed as insulting to the Prophet Mohammed. According to an NGO, Mohammed Mahdaly, a sociology professor in the High Institute of Social Service in Alexandria, posted a video on his personal Facebook account that mocked the Prophet Mohammed, which resulted in the Ministry of Higher Education suspending Mahdaly. On February 24, the Ministry of Awqaf suspended well-known al-Azhar cleric Abdullah Rushdy for a post on social media in which he suggested that a Christian cardiac surgeon would not enter heaven due to his religious affiliation. In March, Islamic scholar Dr. Haitham Talaat posted a video online in which he said atheists were social outcasts, infidels, and apostates and were worse than terrorists or armed robbers.

U.S. officials, including the Ambassador, other embassy representatives, senior Department of State officials, and the acting Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development met with government officials and religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with the Grand Mufti, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, bishops and senior pastors of the Coptic Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican churches, and the Jewish community. In the meetings, embassy officials raised the importance of the need for accountability for sectarian violence, protections for victims of sectarian attacks, and concerns about religious discrimination, including through the inclusion of official religious designations on national identity cards. They also discussed progress on issues such as legalization and construction of churches, and the restoration and protection of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish religious sites.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 104.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Most experts and media sources estimate that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and 10 percent is 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. These include Anglican/Episcopalian, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Latin, and Syrian), and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) Churches. Most Protestant denominations are members of the umbrella group known as the Protestant Churches of Egypt (PCE), also known as the Evangelical Church Association. These include the 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 (al-Ni'ma), Independent Apostolic, Message Church of Holland (ar-Risaala), Open Brethren, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), and Seventh-Day Adventists. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and an estimated 150 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the vast majority of whom are expatriates. 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.

Scholars estimate that Shia Muslims comprise approximately 1 percent of the population. Baha'i representatives estimate the size of the community to be between 1,000 and 2,000 persons. There are very small numbers of Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and expatriate members of various groups.

According to a local Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO), there are six to 10 Jews.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation. The constitution states that “freedom of belief is absolute” and “the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of Abrahamic religions is a right regulated by law.” The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and makes “incitement to hate” a crime. The constitution prohibits political activity or the formation of political parties on the basis of religion.

The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and allows only their adherents as defined by the government to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. The constitution 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 Grand Imam is elected by al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars and is officially appointed by the President for a life term. The President does not have the authority to dismiss him. The constitution declares al-Azhar to be an independent institution and requires the government to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes.”

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

The constitution stipulates the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. Individuals are subject to different sets of personal status laws (regarding 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 citizens. Although the government designates Jehovah's Witnesses as “Christian” on identity cards, a presidential decree bans their religious activities. Since a 2009 court order, Baha'is 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, nor efforts to proselytize. The law states individuals may change their religion. However, the government recognizes conversion to Islam, but generally not from Islam to any other religion. The government recognizes 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 should 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. When these children reach the age of 18, they have the option of converting to Christianity and having that reflected on their identity cards.

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

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. In 2017, however, an appellate court ruled applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that personal status matters for Christian and Jewish communities are governed by their respective religious doctrine.

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

There are four entities currently authorized to issue fatwas (religious rulings binding on Muslims): the al-Azhar Council of Senior Scholars, the al-Azhar Islamic Research Center, the Dar al-Iftaa (House of Religious Edicts), and the Ministry of Awqaf's General Fatwa Directorate. Previously part of the Ministry of Justice, Dar al-Iftaa has been an independent organization since 2007.

Islamic, Christian, 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 the Interior'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 President then reviews and decides on the registration application.

The law does not recognize the Baha'i faith or its religious laws and bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. The law does not stipulate 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, a fine of up to 50,000 pounds (\$3,200), or both. 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 (860 square feet), bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services (other prayer services are permitted), and pays bonuses to imams who deliver Friday sermons written and disseminated by the Ministry of Awqaf. Ministry personnel monitor Friday sermons in major mosques, and an imam who fails to follow the guidelines for ministry sermons may lose the bonus and be subject to disciplinary measures, including potentially losing his preaching license.

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

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

Under a separate law governing the construction of mosques, the Ministry of Awqaf approves permits to build mosques. A 2001 cabinet decree includes a list of 10 provisions requiring that new mosques built after that date must, among other conditions, be a minimum of 500 meters (1,600 feet) from the nearest other mosque, have a ground surface of at least 175 square meters (1,884 square feet), and be built only in areas where “the existing mosques do not accommodate the number of residents in the area.” The law does not require Ministry of Awqaf approval for mosque renovations.

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

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion and defines it as including “any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to... religion or belief.” The law stipulates imprisonment, a fine of no less than 30,000 pounds (\$1,900) and no more than 50,000 pounds (\$3,200), or both, 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 pounds (\$3,200) and no more than 100,000 pounds (\$6,400).

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

Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church formed the Family House (Beit al-A’ila) in 2011 to address sectarian disputes through communal reconciliation. With Family House branches throughout the country, al-Azhar, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and other Christian denominations bring together opposing parties to a sectarian dispute with the goal of restoring communal peace through dialogue. The Family House, however, is not uniformly active. Muslim and Christian religious leaders said that in some areas, such as Assiut, the Family House is quite active, while in others, such as Cairo and Alexandria, it has become largely inactive.

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim citizens with documentation from a cleric and does not recognize civil marriage for citizens. Marriages of Shia are recognized as Muslim. The government recognizes civil marriages of individuals from other religious groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, if one or both are foreigners. Authorities deny Baha’is the rights of married couples pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse. In practice, however, Baha’is are able to file individual petitions for recognition of their marriages in civil court.

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 called “Alternative Family” which recognizes permanent legal guardianship if certain conditions are met, including requirements that the guardians share the same religion as the child and have been married to one another for a minimum of five years.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights, whose members are appointed by parliament under a 2016 law, 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 engaged in, or political parties formed, on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect, or geographic location.

The constitution mandates that the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by parliament. However, as of year’s end, parliament had not acted to implement the mandate.

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

Government Practices

On February 24, the government executed eight men at Borg al-Arab Prison in Alexandria for their role in attacks on churches in Alexandria and Tanta on Palm Sunday, 2017, that resulted in 88 deaths. The men were among a group of 17 defendants who were tried and sentenced to death in 2018 for their involvement in these and other attacks.

On June 2, the Giza Criminal Court sentenced seven defendants to 15 years’ imprisonment each on charges of membership in a banned group, possession of firearms, setting fire to a religious establishment, and other charges for their roles in the arson attack on the Kafr Hakim Church in Kerdasa in Giza Governorate in 2013. On September 17, the Court of Cassation ordered that an additional 22 defendants, who in 2018 were each sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment for the attack on the church, have their sentences reduced to between two and five years’ imprisonment.

On June 27, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies condemned the continued detention of human rights advocate Ramy Kamel Saied Salid and other activists. Authorities originally arrested Kamel in November 2019 following his application for a Swiss visa to speak at a UN forum in Geneva, where he had previously presented issues affecting the Coptic community. The government charged him with joining a banned group and spreading false news. On December 6, a Cairo court renewed his detention for 45 days.

On August 22, authorities arrested Reda Abdel-Rahman, a teacher in Kafr Saqr in Sharqia Governorate and member of the Quranists (*Quraniyyun*), who believe that the Quran is the sole source of Islamic law and reject the authenticity and authority of the hadith (the body of sayings and traditions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed). In September, press and NGOs reported that authorities were investigating Abdel-Rahman for joining ISIS, adopting *takfiri* extremist ideas, and promoting those ideas in print, based on papers seized from his residence at the time of his arrest. According to the NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), security officers questioned Abdel-Rahman and seven of his relatives arrested at the same time about their relationship with Quranist leader Dr. Ahmed Sobhi Mansour and their adoption of Quranist principles before releasing the seven relatives. EIPR called for Abdel-Rahman’s release and for dropping the charges against him. On December 31, authorities renewed Abdel-Rahman’s detention.

On January 11, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced three defendants in absentia to 10 years’ imprisonment each for a 2016 attack on Souad Thabet, a Christian who was stripped and dragged through her village of Karm in Minya, in response to rumors that her son had an affair with the wife of a Muslim business partner. Authorities originally charged four persons with attacking Thabet and another 25 with attacking Thabet’s home and six other homes owned by Christians. According to the newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm*, Thabet welcomed the convictions and praised President al-Sisi for his public support for her and her family. Three defendants, sentenced in absentia, surrendered to authorities and faced automatic retrial on the same charges in the Minya Criminal Court. (The status of the fourth defendant remained unknown.) After announcing that it would hand down its verdict on August 24, the Minya Criminal Court ordered the case returned to the Beni Suef Criminal Court, which acquitted the three men on December 17. The same day, the Public Prosecutor ordered the formation of a technical committee to review and challenge the acquittal. The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms told the al-Monitor news website the verdict demonstrated the deep-rooted bias within the judicial system against Christians. According to an analyst of customary reconciliation sessions from EIPR, local Christians whose houses had been damaged in the incident agreed to hold a customary reconciliation session with the alleged assailants after facing pressure from the local Muslim community in February.

On June 21, the Economic Misdemeanor Appeals Court in Alexandria rejected an appeal submitted on behalf of atheist activist and blogger Anas Hassan to a February 27 verdict sentencing him to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 pounds (\$19,100) for managing “The Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page. Authorities arrested Hassan in 2019 for publishing atheist ideas and criticizing the “divinely revealed religions.”

NGOs and press reported that on May 20, authorities assaulted a priest and arrested 14 Copts who were protesting the destruction of their church in Beheira Governorate. The lawyer for the Coptic community said that the church had been used for 15 years before the Abu al-Matamir city council ordered it removed. According to NGOs, after the church opened, local Muslims built a mosque next to the church with the aim of preventing the church from being legalized. According to NGO reports, security forces razed both the church and the adjacent mosque, since both appeared to encroach on agricultural land owned by the state. Church officials later stated that the government was within its rights to dismantle the church.

Although in late 2018 President al-Sisi stated individuals have the “right to worship God” as they see fit or “even worship nothing,” efforts to combat atheism sometimes received official support. In 2019, al-Azhar founded a “*Bayan*” (Declaration) Unit in its Center for Electronic Fatwa to “counter atheism” and prevent youth from “falling into disbelief.” The Bayan Unit published several social media pieces that were critical of atheism, and on August 25, as part of a training program, al-Azhar organized a workshop on “atheism, its types, and the most important methods of dealing with adherents of its ideas.”

On April 13, authorities in Beheira Governorate detained three Muslim teenagers on suspicion of blasphemy after they posted a video showing one of them smoking while performing prayers. According to local press, the three minors confessed, and said they posted the video to become famous.

On June 27, the State Security Misdemeanor Court in Mashtoul al-Souk in Sharqia Governorate sentenced two men initially arrested in 2019 to one year in prison each for violating laws against “contempt of religions” for spreading and promoting Shia Islam. According to an international NGO, the government based its prosecution of the two men on provisions in the penal code that criminalize the defamation of religion and spreading propaganda “insulting ‘the heavenly [Abrahamic] religions.’”

On February 23, an administrative court ordered all Shia websites and television channels closed including the well-known website *elnafisbook.com*, which belonged to Shia activist Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis, a doctor and professor who converted from Sunni to Shia Islam. The court’s decision followed a lawsuit filed by activist lawyer Samir Sabry, whose office told the press after the decision, “The reasons behind this verdict are based on the dangers of Shiite ideology on Egyptian society and national security, as Shiites in Egypt use religion for political manipulation.” Al-Nafis said the country’s Shia community was not interested in conversions and added, “We are

not hurting anyone.” One press report stated that the verdict was issued despite the fact that there are no laws prohibiting the promotion of Shia beliefs and that a 1959 fatwa from al-Azhar recognized the legitimacy of the Shia Jafaari school along with the four main Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

On August 26, a Port Said criminal court sentenced a man in absentia to 15 years in prison for allegedly “distorting” the text of the Quran after he said he had received a divine revelation. The court convicted the man of producing a “new Quran” in violation of laws that regulate the printing of the Quran.

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. The government in 2013 banned the Brotherhood’s political party, the Freedom and Justice Party. On August 28, the MOI announced the arrest of Mahmoud Ezzat, acting supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ezzat had been a fugitive since 2013 when he was sentenced in absentia to two death sentences and life imprisonment on multiple terrorism-related charges. Following his arrest, the law required he face retrial on those charges. Upon Ezzat’s arrest, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated sources announced that Ibrahim Mounir, who lives in the United Kingdom, had become the new acting supreme guide.

The Court of Cassation in July upheld a life sentence for Mohammed Badie and five other Muslim Brotherhood leaders convicted for involvement in political violence in 2013. Essam al-Erian, whom the press identified as a senior Muslim Brotherhood leader who served as vice chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, died of a heart attack in Tora Prison on August 13.

On February 6, security authorities arrested Ahmed Sebaie, who managed a YouTube channel with 404,000 followers that focused on religion. Sebaie produced several videos in which he discussed Christian doctrinal issues, commented on social media posts of atheists, and discussed Islam. After 29 days in detention, authorities released Sebaie without charges. On November 27, authorities arrested Sebaie again after he posted a video discussing the Bible and Christian doctrine to social media and charged him with reading false news and misuse of social media.

On May 5, authorities in Alexandria arrested 10 persons for holding Ramadan night prayers in contravention of the Ministry of Awqaf’s closure of mosques due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All were subsequently released without charges.

On February 2, the director of the Alexandria Ministry of Awqaf ordered a deduction of three months’ salary from preacher Mohammed Kamal Mohammed for failing to adhere to the ministry’s official topic for Friday sermons. In August, the Ministry of Awqaf revoked the preaching license of an al-Azhar preacher after accusing him of membership in the Muslim Brotherhood and calling for violence.

According to the NGO Arab Network for Human Rights Information, imprisoned labor activist Khalil Rizk asked a warden of Tora Prison that he be allowed to attend Coptic Christmas services on January 1. Although authorities told Rizk his request had been approved, they did not allow him to attend Christmas prayers or allow a priest to visit him.

On January 6, EIPR issued a statement criticizing the pace of legalization of churches and subsidiary buildings that had filed applications since 2016 and called for a single, uniform decree granting final legal status to all churches and subsidiary buildings.

According to official statistics, the government approved 478 applications for legalization for churches and related buildings during the year. Since September 2017, it approved 1,800 of the 5,415 pending applications for licensure of churches and related buildings.

According to a report issued by the media center of the cabinet, the government allocated lands during the year to build 10 churches in eight cities (Sadat, New 6th of October, New Beni Suef, Badr, Nasser, and New Sohag). At the May 21 inauguration of Project Good Hope 3 in Alexandria, a complex that will provide housing for 50,000 individuals and feature a centrally located new cathedral and mosque in close proximity, President al-Sisi stated, “The idea is that when we built the schools, the church, and the mosque, our young children will see that we are one country, one people.”

In September, the government announced that it would open and renovate more than 300 mosques in several governorates across the country in September and October. According to press reports, the step came in response to accusations by the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups that authorities had been demolishing mosques in a crackdown on illegal buildings.

A cabinet report stated that the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities allocated 41 million pounds (\$2.61 million) for the Journey of the Holy Family project, a 2,100 mile trail that will extend from Sinai to Assiut, and will include stops at churches, monasteries, and water wells in 11 governorates. Those governorates have provided 448 million pounds (\$28.55 million) for related development projects, according to the report.

According to a 2019 report by Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), an international NGO, there continued to be no Shia congregational halls (*housseiniyahs*) in the country, and Shia Muslims remained unable to establish public places of worship. Members of the Shia community risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing their religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought. Shia Muslims said they were excluded from service in the armed services, and from the security and intelligence services.

The press reported that a government committee charged with the seizure of Muslim Brotherhood assets filed a lawsuit in September to confiscate the funds of 89 Muslim Brotherhood members, including the heirs of former President Mohammed Morsi. The court scheduled a hearing for January 2021.

In January, the General Egyptian Book Organization, the government authority that oversees the Cairo International Book Fair (CIBF), announced that it had excluded a number of publishers of Islamic titles from participating in the fair, held in January and February, and barred the sale of several authors for their alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, including Sayyed Qutb, Hassan al Banna, and Youssef Qaradawi. A CIBF representative said publishers were required to submit lists of titles that they intended to display for approval, and security officials reportedly rejected some of the applications submitted by Islamic publishing houses. In a January 25 statement, the chairman of the General Egyptian Book Organization said that it took the actions to “prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from carrying out its activities.” On February 25, the Anti-Defamation League published a letter it had sent to President al-Sisi that condemned the presence of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *Mein Kampf*, and other anti-Semitic literature at the book fair. The General Egyptian Book Authority did not bar the publishers, one of which was affiliated with the government, from participating in the fair or order the books removed, citing the government’s commitment to freedom of speech. The Simon Wiesenthal Center published a letter which stated that the CIBF continued to allow the publisher Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi to display anti-Semitic publications.

On September 26, the Supreme Administrative Court denied an appeal against a 2014 decision by the Alexandria Judicial Court upholding a prohibition of the annual celebration of the birth of Rabbi Yaquob bin Masoud, also known as Abu Hasira, at his tomb in the Beheira Governorate; ordered the removal of the shrine from the government’s list of Islamic, Jewish, and Coptic antiquities; and rejected a request to move the rabbi’s remains to Israel. The court justified its decision to prohibit the annual celebration, citing “moral offenses and disturbances to public order,” and ruled that the shrine lacked archaeological significance. The government first listed the tomb and the Jewish cemeteries surrounding it as antiquities in 2001. The court ordered the government to inform UNESCO of its decision.

While the Coptic Orthodox Church does not bar participation in government-sponsored customary reconciliation sessions, according to its spokesman, reconciliation sessions should not be used in lieu of application of the law and should be restricted to “clearing the air and making amends” following sectarian disputes or violence. At least one Coptic Orthodox diocese in Upper Egypt continued to refuse to participate in reconciliation sessions, criticizing such sessions as substitutes for criminal proceedings which would address attacks on Christians and their churches. Other Christian denominations continued to participate in customary reconciliation sessions. Human rights groups and some Christian community representatives characterized the practice as an encroachment on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship that regularly pressures Christians to retract their statements and deny facts, leading to the dropping of formal criminal charges.

On March 20 and 21, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Awqaf announced the closure of all churches and mosques to curb the spread of COVID-19. Churches and mosques remained closed through August. Religious institutions made concerted efforts to persuade the population to address the spread of COVID-19. On March 29, the Ministry of Awqaf, explaining its decision to close mosques, said that a fundamental goal of Islamic law was to preserve life. On March 15, al-Azhar Council of Senior Scholars, the highest Islamic advisory body, declared it religiously permissible to suspend communal prayers in mosques to curb the spread of the pandemic. On March 17, Grand Mufti Shawky Allam said Egyptians should follow government guidelines on social distancing and hygiene, and on April 1, Dar al-Iftaa issued a fatwa encouraging the distribution of alms to workers affected by COVID-19.

On July 4, the Ministry of Awqaf ordered barriers placed around the tomb of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, located inside al-Hussein Mosque in Old Cairo, an action the ministry said was intended to stem the spread of COVID-19 after some worshippers kissed the shrine. In previous years, the government closed the room containing the tomb during the three-day Shia commemoration of Ashura.

On January 26, the High Administrative Court upheld a final verdict banning faculty and teaching staff of Cairo University from wearing the *niqab* (face veil) during classes, putting an end to a case first filed by 80 faculty members in 2015. The ban only applied to lecture halls during classes and did not apply to students. The ban came into force on February 8, with instructions that professors who did not comply were to be prohibited from teaching. On January 30, Ain Shams University issued a similar ban on the *niqab* for university staff.

The government largely continued to allow Baha’is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Shia Muslims to worship privately in small numbers but continued to refuse requests for public religious gatherings.

The government continued to ban the importation and sale of Baha’i and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature and to authorize customs officials to confiscate their personally owned religious materials.

According to local media, on May 30, the Supreme Administrative Court dissolved the Islamist Building and Development Party based on an allegation of the Political Parties Affairs Committee, which oversees political parties, that the party was affiliated with an Islamist group in violation of the law. While authorities did not ban other Islamist parties, including the Strong Egypt Party, they added Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, leader of the Strong Egypt Party, to a list of designated terrorists on November 19.

The Minister of Immigration and Expatriate Affairs was the only Christian in the cabinet. The governors of the Damietta and Ismailia governorates are Christian, as is a deputy governor of Alexandria Governorate. The governor of Damietta was the country’s first female Christian governor. The electoral laws governing the 2020 House of Representatives elections reserved 24 seats for Christian candidates in the closed-list portion of the electoral system. Three Christians won elections as independent candidates to the House of Representatives in November. In addition, 17 Christian senators and two Christian representatives were elected, and President al-Sisi appointed seven Christian senators. President al-Sisi has approximately five senior Christian advisors.

Christians reported being underrepresented in the military and security services, and they stated that those admitted at entry levels of government face limited opportunities for promotion to the upper ranks.

No Christians served as presidents of the country’s 27 public universities. The government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers, stating as its reason that the curriculum involved study of the Quran.

The government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country. Sources continued to report, however, that some religious workers were denied visas or refused entry upon arrival without explanation.

The Ministry of Education and Technical Education continued to develop a new curriculum that included increased coverage of respect for human rights and religious tolerance. In the fall, third grade students began instruction using revised textbooks under the new curriculum. On September 8, Minister of Education Tarek Shawki said in a press conference that President al-Sisi directed third grade classes to begin universal instruction from the book *Values and Respect for Others*, a text to teach ethics drawn from Islamic and Christian religious traditions.

On February 18, the cabinet announced that the Ministry of Social Solidarity, in cooperation with the Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents and the Ministries of Education and Technical Education, Awqaf, Culture, and Youth and Sports and the National Council of Women, signed eight protocols of cooperation with a number of Muslim and Christian NGOs to launch a program to promote equality in Minya Governorate, a region with a significant Christian population and a history of sectarian tensions. The cabinet announced a budget of 12 million pounds (\$765,000) for the program that would target 44 villages.

Grand Imam El-Tayyeb made multiple public references to the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which he signed with Pope Francis in 2019, as a framework for “a world full of prosperity, tolerance, peace, and love.” In a January 18 meeting with a delegation of French Catholic bishops, El-Tayyeb said the document’s principles offered a “safe way out of the problems of the East and West.”

In January, the al-Azhar Curricula Development Committee announced that in addition to highlighting unity between Muslims and Christians and the concept of citizenship without distinction to religious belief, new textbooks in the 11,000 schools under its purview would include material based upon the principles of the *Document on Human Fraternity*. In 2019, the committee announced the introduction of new primary, secondary, and university textbooks that promote religious tolerance.

Al-Azhar continued tracking and countering online statements by ISIS and other extremist groups through the al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism. The observatory’s staff of approximately 100 individuals monitored and offered counterarguments to religious statements on jihadi websites. The center’s website and social media employed several languages to reach foreign audiences, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, and Farsi. Al-Azhar, through the al-Azhar International Academy, also continued to offer courses to imams and preachers in 20 countries on a wide range of subjects related to Islam. Al-Azhar largely curtailed travel and in-person training during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic but continued to offer training virtually.

In a June 28 meeting with his cabinet, President al-Sisi urged “giving the highest priority to spreading awareness among students of the principles of all religions, including freedom of belief, tolerance and acceptance of differences.” On October 21, after images of the Prophet Mohammed that Muslims widely considered blasphemous were published and displayed in France, the President gave an address to commemorate the Prophet’s birthday during which he said freedom of expression should have limits if it offended more than 1.5 billion people. Al-Sisi said, “We also have rights. We have the right for our feelings not to be hurt and for our values not to be hurt,” adding that he firmly rejected any form of violence in the name of defending religion, religious symbols, or icons.

While the constitution declares al-Azhar an independent institution, its budgetary allocation from the government, which is required by the constitution to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes,” was almost 16 billion pounds (\$1.02 billion).

Dar al-Iftaa and al-Azhar issued several fatwas and statements permitting and encouraging Muslims to congratulate Christians on their holidays, to assist non-Muslims in need, and to “stop using [religious] beliefs as means to harm or diminish others.” On April 18, Grand Imam El-Tayyeb congratulated Christians on Easter Sunday, stressing the bond of “brotherhood and love” between the country’s Muslims and Christians and highlighting that Christians were “good people (who) set the most wonderful example of solidarity and cohesion in critical moments, especially during this pandemic.”

On May 14, Dar al-Iftaa issued a fatwa stating that it is permissible for Muslims to give *zakat* (religiously mandated charitable donations) to non-Muslims in need of treatment for COVID-19 or other diseases or to meet any other material needs.

On June 16, Dar al-Iftaa issued a series of statements on social media following the death due to suicide of Sarah Hegazy, an Egyptian lesbian activist, writer, and reported atheist. Dar al-Iftaa wrote that “all heavenly religions” prohibit homosexuality and that atheism was an “intellectual problem” and a “psychological disease” requiring treatment. However, the statement continued, Muslims claiming “with full certainty” that a person “will never enter paradise” were “absolutely wrong, because such judgement of who goes to heaven and who does not is up to Allah.”

Following a government investment of 60 million pounds (\$3.82 million), on January 10, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA) reopened the Eliyahu HaNevi synagogue in Alexandria. Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Khaled al-Anani noted in his remarks at the opening ceremony that “the opening of the Jewish synagogue in Alexandria after its restoration is a message to the world that the Egyptian government cares about the Egyptian heritage of all religions.” On February 14, the government sent a representative to a rededication ceremony of the synagogue honoring 174 members of the diaspora Jewish community from approximately a dozen countries.

On July 20, the government demolished several Islamic cemeteries it said dated from the early 20th century as part of a roadworks project, but denied reports that it had demolished parts of Cairo’s oldest Islamic cemetery, the Mamluk Desert Cemetery. Activists asserted that the tombs were part of the country’s Islamic heritage and that the cost of moving the graves was prohibitive for the families of the deceased.

On January 27 and 28, under the auspices of President al-Sisi, al-Azhar held the International Conference on the Renovation of Islamic Thought attended by Muslim scholars from 47 countries. Al-Azhar announced the opening of a new center for the renewal of Islamic thought during the conference. In remarks made on behalf of President al-Sisi, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly urged the acceleration of reforming religious discourse, stressed the importance of countering “bogus” messaging and “pretentious” religious scholars who “hijack the minds of youth,” and called for practical solutions to the problems that divide Muslims. Al-Azhar Grand Imam El-Tayyeb criticized extremist religious thought and what he labeled as distorted and mocking images of Islam in the West. In an accompanying panel discussion, El-Tayyeb and Cairo University president Mohammed al-Khost presented contrasting views of the nature of possible reforms. Khost called for revisiting and revising sharia and the hadith for a modern world, while El-Tayyeb said that Muslims should build on, not abandon, Islamic tradition and attributed extremism in the Islamic world to politics, not to religious heritage.

A columnist in the government-owned newspaper *Al-Youm7* wrote that the conference showed that the leaders of al-Azhar were “not concerned with the issue of renewing thought and enlightenment, but rather ... in preserving the heritage that enables them to keep their great privileges in power and [to] collect the spoils and remain in the spotlight, using religion as a vehicle.” Former Minister of Culture and public intellectual Gaber Asfour told international press that “The current leadership of al-Azhar does not believe in renewal and is comfortable with the way things are.”

In July, press reported that al-Azhar’s Council of Senior Scholars released a letter it had sent to the parliamentary speaker in February that rejected, on constitutional grounds, a proposed law drafted by the government that would have changed the status of the Dar al-Iftaa and the Grand Mufti, making them independent of al-Azhar. Sources told the press that the main objective of the proposed law was to create a parallel entity to al-Azhar, under the direct control of the government. The draft legislation, introduced in parliament in August, would have granted the President the right to appoint the Mufti. The State Council ruled the draft law was unconstitutional and returned it to parliament where the Religious Affairs Committee withdrew it from further consideration. After the decision to withdraw the bill, Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb said that the decision to withdraw the bill demonstrated that the country continued to respect its constitution and appreciate its national institutions, including al-Azhar.

On June 22, the Ministry of Awqaf announced the formation of a committee “to counter extremist ideology.” The ministry said the committee was tasked with developing plans to confront extremist thought among ministry preachers and employees.

In 2019, the Ministry of Awqaf announced it would prepare a “unique and distinctive architectural style” for all new mosques in the country, and that in the future, only mosques that complied with approved designs would be granted construction permits. Implementation of the new directive was pending at year’s end.

In 2019, the state-run University of Alexandria and the state-run University of Damanhour established centers of Coptic studies in collaboration with the Coptic Orthodox Church. The institutes include courses on the study of Coptic language, literature, history, and art. The center at the University of Alexandria first began accepting applications in 2019. On March 4, the state-run Zagazig University and the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo signed an agreement for institutional cooperation in the fields of art, education, music, and the sciences. The agreement allows for an exchange of library services and publications and jointly held academic conferences.

On July 13, the Cairo Court of Appeals upheld a 2019 lower court ruling granting a Christian woman equal distribution of inheritance with her male siblings and declaring that the case was subject to Christian customary laws of inheritance rather than Islamic law.

On October 15, representatives from the Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical, and Catholic churches submitted a draft unified personal status law to the cabinet, covering such issues as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In December, senior Coptic Orthodox Church representatives and the press announced that the cabinet had concluded its review of the draft law, which, according to press reports, incorporates and regulates personal status matters that the churches hold in common, while retaining articles specific to the doctrinal teachings of the three denominations.

On February 20, Grand Mufti Shawki Allam met with the World Council of Churches general secretary, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, in the council’s Ecumenical Center in Geneva to discuss promotion of interreligious dialogue and combating extremism.

In January, Mohammed Fayek, president of the National Council for Human Rights, called on parliament to approve two draft laws on equal opportunity and preventing discrimination and to establish the constitutionally mandated independent commission to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

On July 21, Prime Minister Madbouly visited the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site, built in the sixth century. On the occasion of the visit, the government announced that it would allocate 40 million pounds (\$2.55 million) to restore and develop the monastery and its neighboring city.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Terrorist groups, including Islamic State-Sinai Peninsula (formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) among others, conducted deadly attacks on government, civilian, and security targets in the North Sinai Governorate.

In April, security forces said that a shootout with militants in the Amiriyah neighborhood of Cairo disrupted a plot against Coptic Orthodox Easter.

Press and NGOs reported that a fight broke out between Muslims and Christians in Dabbous in Minya Governorate on October 3 during a Coptic wedding that led to further violence two days later. Police arrested 12 individuals from both sides.

Newspapers reported that a crowd of Muslims attacked Christian homes and a church in the village of al-Barsha in Minya Governorate on November 25 after rumors circulated that a local Christian man had social media posts deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed. There was minimal damage and no casualties, and police made multiple arrests of Muslims and Christians.

On January 12 in Cairo, a man attacked a Christian woman with a knife, injuring her neck. According to media reports, the man said he attacked the woman because “she was not covering her hair.” Authorities arrested the attacker and, according to press reports, the prosecutor referred him to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation.

According to an NGO, Mohammed Mahdaly, a sociology professor at the High Institute for Social Service, posted a video on his personal Facebook account that mocked the Prophet Mohammed and was “insulting” to the Quran. A Ministry of Higher Education official told the press that it had suspended the professor and referred the matter for investigation to a committee of professors at the University of Alexandria. The ministry referred Mahdaly’s case to the Public Prosecutor. Mahdaly, who had been experiencing health issues, passed away on December 24.

On May 16, authorities arrested a man after he reportedly threw a Molotov cocktail at the Virgin Mary and the Martyr St. George Church in Alexandria. There were no casualties or property damage. Prosecutors subsequently requested that the man undergo a psychiatric evaluation and said he had previously been under psychiatric care.

While there have been reports of abducted Coptic girls and women, government officials, leaders in the Christian community, and NGOs stated that they were skeptical of the classification of the cases as abductions. In a report released September 10, “*Jihad of the Womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt*,” the NGO Coptic Solidarity reported on what it described as “the widespread practice of abduction and trafficking of Coptic women and girls...and how they are a particularly vulnerable group.” In March, MRGI reported that there were at least 13 reported cases of abducted Coptic women since October 2019.

Eshhad, a website that records sectarian attacks, documented a 29 percent reduction of intercommunal violence in recent years.

The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), the country’s media oversight agency, opened an investigation of television personality Radwa al-Sherbini after she said that women who wear the hijab are “100,000 times better than me and non-hijab [wearing] women...” and that “the devil inside women [who do not wear hijabs] is more powerful than their faith and strength.” The SCMR said it had received complaints from the public about the comments, and others criticized Sherbini on social media. One prominent women’s rights advocate said Sherbini’s statements instigated violence against nonveiled women. Sherbini later apologized for her comments.

Discrimination in private sector hiring continued, according to human rights groups and religious communities.

EIPR continued to call on the authorities to provide persons of unrecognized religious groups the right to obtain identity cards, marriage certificates, and private burials, and to sue in accordance with their own personal status laws.

Some religious leaders and media personalities continued to employ discriminatory language against Christians. On February 24, Dar al-Iftaa criticized commenters on social media who wrote that Christian cardiac surgeon Magdi Yacoub would not enter heaven due to his faith. In its statement, Dar al-Iftaa said Yacoub “never looked at the religion of those he treated and saved from death but regarded them with compassion, mercy, and humanity.” The Ministry of Awqaf on February 24 suspended well-known al-Azhar cleric Abdullah Rushdy for a post he made on social media that was believed to have targeted Yacoub. Commenting on the controversy, the al-Azhar International Center for Electronic Fatwa urged Egyptians to recognize that “the belief of every human being...is a personal thing between him and his creator, and only Allah will inquire into it.”

In March, Islamic scholar Dr. Haitham Talaat posted a video online in which he said atheists were social outcasts, infidels, and apostates, and were worse than terrorists or armed robbers. Talaat said that engaging in dialogue with atheists could lead to the “inevitable outcome” of suicide.

In a January 24 interview with *Russia Today TV*, historian Mohammad al-Shafi said Jews benefitted the most from World War II by using the Holocaust to “extort the international community” and that other countries harmed by the war “did not receive booty, nor did they profit like the Jews did.” On April 25, the Israeli Foreign Ministry criticized the Ramadan science fiction television series *The End* as “unfortunate and unacceptable” for portraying a dystopian future in which “all of the Jews of Israel have returned to their countries of origin.”

A poll of Arab populations conducted between January and March by a Dubai-based public relations firm and involving a team of international experts, indicated that 69 percent of the country’s citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 – one of the highest results in the region – agreed that religion is “particularly important” to their personal identity.

In a poll conducted by the Arab Center of Washington, D.C., and released in November, 87 percent of respondents in the country either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that “No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions infidels,” compared with 65 percent of respondents region-wide.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Ambassador, the acting Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other embassy officials, regularly raised religious freedom concerns. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives discussed attacks on Christians, church legalization and construction, interfaith dialogue, and countering extremist thought with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, governors, the Grand Imam, the Grand Mufti, and the Coptic Orthodox Pope as well as with civil society and minority religious groups. In their meetings with government officials, embassy officers emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of key issues, including attacks on Christians, recognition of Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the rights of Shia Muslims to perform religious rituals publicly.

Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with senior officials in the offices of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and bishops and senior pastors of Protestant and Anglican churches. In these meetings, embassy staff members raised cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable and failed to protect victims of sectarian attacks; prosecuted individuals for religious defamation; and enabled religious discrimination by means of official religious designations including on national identity cards. They also discussed progress on religious freedom issues such as issuance of permits for and new construction of churches, political support for Christian and Jewish communities, and the protection and restoration of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious sites. In February, the Ambassador delivered remarks on religious pluralism during the February rededication of Alexandria’s Eliyahu HaNevi Synagogue.

U.S. officials met with human rights activists and religious and community leaders to discuss contemporary incidents of sectarian conflict and gather information to raise in meetings with government officials. Embassy representatives also met with leading religious figures, including the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, the Grand Mufti of Dar al-Iftaa, leading Christian clergy, and representatives of the Jewish, Baha’i, and Shia communities. The embassy promoted religious freedom on social media during the year, including two posts describing the context of religious freedom that reached 25,306 persons.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2020)

Country:

Egypt

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 May 2021

Document ID:

2051546

Austrian Red Cross
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Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

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