

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Egypt generally trended in a more positive direction related to high-level official discourse and actions. However, persistent challenges at the community level and a poor, broader human rights situation remained consistent with recent years. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi heightened the inclusion of religious tolerance in public discourse, including continuing his now-annual tradition of attending Coptic Christmas Eve Mass. He also personally oversaw the opening of a Coptic Orthodox cathedral and a mosque in the new administrative capital in January 2019—after the reporting period—encouraging the inclusion of churches in plans for new urban developments and calling for wider freedom of belief and worship. By March 2019, shortly after the reporting period, the cabinet-level committee tasked with approving the registration of churches and church-related buildings under Law 80/2016 approved 783 of the between 5,515 and 5,540 properties slated for registration. The Ministry of Education began issuing a new primary school curriculum for religious instruction. Officials shared its new curriculum with USCIRF during its January 2019 country visit in order to demonstrate the removal of intolerant concepts and language from the state-mandated curriculum. During USCIRF’s visit, Grand

Sheikh of al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb stated that non-Muslims, including Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, should be permitted public places of worship in Egypt, representing a notable shift in rhetoric. Nevertheless, despite these prominent gestures, systematic and ongoing challenges to religious freedom remained widespread at the community level, particularly in rural areas. Anti-Christian mob violence occurred with impunity and regularity in Upper Egypt; on several occasions, these incidents came in direct response to efforts by local Christians to legally register their churches. Meanwhile, Egyptian affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and domestic terror groups continued to target local Christians in addition to government officials and security forces. Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses remained unrecognized, and blasphemy laws, which have not been repealed, continued to be used in targeting Muslims, Christians, and nonreligious persons.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Egypt on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations, thereby meeting at least one of the three elements of the standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Egyptian government to accelerate approvals for churches and church-related buildings that have applied for renovation, construction, or registration under Law 80/2016; enforce the law’s provision that churches awaiting approval can continue to operate; and initiate a national discussion into supplanting that law with one that would uniformly apply to all houses of worship, regardless of religious affiliation;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance—including through Foreign Military Funding (FMF) and Economic Support Fund sources, as appropriate—to programs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to train and equip Egyptian security forces to protect the places of worship and other holy sites of religious minority communities;
- Press the Egyptian government and security services to immediately end the practice of ceding legal authority to customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of anti-Christian mob violence;
- Encourage the Egyptian government to repeal decrees banning Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, remove religion from official identity documents, and pass laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution, such as creating an independent antidiscrimination body that includes non-Sunni Muslim representatives; and
- Urge the Egyptian government to repeal or revise article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which criminalizes contempt of religion, or blasphemy, and in the interim provide the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating article 98(f).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Require the U.S. Department of State to provide justification for the release of any foreign military financing withheld to Egypt, including public disclosure of its assessment and certification of Egypt’s progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Arab Republic of Egypt

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

99,413,317

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED FAITHS

85–90% Sunni Islam, 10–15% Christianity (Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants), <1% Other (Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Jews)

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

90% Muslim (predominantly Sunni)

10% Christian (majority Coptic Orthodox; other Christians include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Maronite, Orthodox, and Anglican) (2015 estimate)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

Egypt's constitution identifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of Shari'ah as the primary source of legislation. While article 64 of the constitution states that "freedom of belief is absolute," only Muslims, Christians, and Jews can practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Of the country's estimated 99 million people, 85 to 90 percent are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than one percent. Ten to 15 percent are Christians, the vast majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; others belong to various other denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and others. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 20 Jews.

Egypt has experienced both progress and setbacks during its political transition since 2013. President El-Sisi has overseen several key economic reforms and initiatives that returned the Egyptian economy to a position of relative—if fragile—stability, garnering praise from partners such as the International Monetary Fund. The government has, however, paid less attention to other social concerns during this transitional period, including endemic gender-based challenges such as the sexual harassment of women

in public spaces and the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM)—a practice that is formally banned but persists at an alarming rate. At the same time, the Egyptian military has been unable to decisively end an insurgency by a North Sinai-based affiliate of ISIS, despite a campaign since mid-2015 to do so. Attacks by ISIS or other domestic terror groups on the Egyptian mainland slowed in 2018 in comparison to prior years, but they continued to pose a serious danger to security forces, religious minorities, and the general public.

Furthermore, the government's initial effort to combat Islamist violence and ideology has evolved into a more general and severe crackdown on all perceived dissent or criticism toward the country's leadership. Thousands of sympathizers and members of the Muslim Brotherhood have faced arrest, trial, and conviction, but the government has similarly jailed journalists, secular and liberal activists, and other non-Islamist critics. Egyptian independent media continued to be prevented from expressing dissenting political views, and presenters or outlets that defy this expectation are silenced. Crackdown on public dissent became particularly acute ahead of the March 2018 presidential election when journalists and potential candidates alike faced harassment and arrest in a clear effort to remove any perceived barriers to President El-Sisi's reelection. Hundreds of nongovernmental

organization (NGO) workers have faced widespread legal obstacles such as closures and arrests under Law 70/2017, which severely restricts operations and foreign funding of NGOs. However, the government launched an effort in late 2018 to conduct a thorough review of the law following President El-Sisi's public pledge to address its well-documented flaws.

In March 2018 and January 2019, just after the reporting period, USCIRF delegations traveled to Egypt to assess religious freedom conditions and met with a range of Egyptian government officials, including Minister of Education Tarek Shawki; Grand Sheikh El-Tayeb; Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church; and religious leaders and human rights defenders. During the latter visit, USCIRF members also joined national political and religious leaders at the formal opening of the Cathedral of the Nativity and al-Fatah al-Alim Mosque, both in the country's new administrative capital.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Positive Developments

Senior Egyptian leadership made positive gestures toward recognizing the need for greater religious freedom and representation of religious minorities in public life. President El-Sisi publicly commented on this subject on multiple occasions during 2018. In December, he insisted that new residential development projects include churches and in November, during the World Youth Forum, he stated his belief that all people should be allowed to believe or not believe as they choose, and to have their own places of worship. Grand Sheikh El-Tayeb, the country's senior most Sunni Muslim scholar, told USCIRF that all religious communities in Egypt should be allowed to have their own places of worship and the state should guarantee their protection, even communities such as the Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, who are formally banned as falling outside accepted Abrahamic traditions ("heavenly religions").

During his public remarks at the January 2019 opening of the new Coptic Orthodox cathedral, Grand Sheikh

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El-Tayeb also called for tolerance and unity among Muslims, Christians, and Jews while admonishing fellow Muslims to take responsibility for protecting churches as well as mosques. In fact, just one day earlier a Muslim police officer had died and two others were injured while attempting to defuse a crude bomb planted near a church in the Nasr City neighborhood of Cairo.

The Egyptian government also took some important but limited practical steps toward the improvement of religious freedom conditions. In 2018, and just after the reporting period, the cabinet committee tasked with approving the registration of churches and church-related buildings under the Church Building Law of 2016 (Law 80/2016)—the first law of its kind in Egypt—granted incremental approval to 783 of the 5,515–5,540 relevant properties that had submitted applications. In September 2018, President El-Sisi appointed Manal Awad as the governor of Dumyat, representing the first Christian woman to hold that post and only the fourth Copt in Egypt's modern history to receive a gubernatorial appointment. Finally, Minister of Education Shawki told USCIRF that plans to reform the public school curriculum had made important progress during 2018, including that new primary school textbooks on religion no longer contained exclusionary or intolerant language.

Construction, Renovation, and Registration of Churches

Despite these positive signs from Egyptian leadership, there remain significant challenges to religious freedom throughout the country. The 783 churches and church-related buildings that received registration approval during and just after the 2018 reporting

period represent just over 14 percent of the 5,515–5,540 relevant properties. Furthermore, the vast majority of these applications represent preexisting properties that were already in use for religious purposes for years or even decades in some cases, generally

in rural communities in which there were insufficient church facilities—or none at all—to accommodate the

local Coptic population. Neither these approvals, nor the additional facilities that have applied to register, nor the presence of preexisting churches address the country's uneven policies regarding places of worship. Given that governors approved only eight new churches since the passage of Law 80/2016, including three properties in new and currently uninhabited urban developments, that disproportion remains largely overlooked.

There remain other serious problems with the structure and implementation of Law 80/2016. Egyptian security agencies maintain an unnecessary and outsized role in the registration approval process, although they play no such formal role in the approval of mosques. Furthermore, even as the responsible cabinet committee cleared 783

properties for registration during or just after the reporting period, local or provincial authorities closed at least eight other churches during the year. Several of those closures occurred as a result of mob violence directed

toward Christians; rather than uphold the rule of law, authorities instead deferred to mob rule by allowing customary reconciliation sessions to determine the outcome. Relatedly, several such incidents directly resulted from reports that Christians had applied to register church-related properties or planned to do so, such as the March 2018 closure of the Church of the Virgin in al-Toud, Qena Governorate, and the April 2018 closure of the Church of the Virgin and Pope Kirullus in Beni Menin, Beni Suef Governorate.

Sectarian Attacks and Legal Impunity

While incidents of violence directly targeting Christians resulted in fewer casualties than in previous years, they persisted in various forms throughout 2018. Nongovernmental interlocutors informed USCIRF during a January 2019 country visit that there were at least 25 incidents of violence or attempted violence against Christians during the reporting period. Such incidents included an attempted suicide bombing on a Coptic Orthodox church in Qalyubiya in August, which police successfully thwarted before the would-be bomber reached his

intended target. In November 2018, in the deadliest single attack of the year, gunmen in the governorate of Minya attacked two minibuses of Christian pilgrims who had just left the Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor, killing seven people and injuring seven others. The Egyptian branch of ISIS later claimed responsibility for that attack.

Egyptian authorities typically single out these large-scale incidents as symptomatic of terrorist organizations that target Christians as well as security forces and police. During 2018, ISIS and remnants of other radical Islamist groups continued to pose a serious threat to Egypt's large Christian population. However, blaming Egypt's sectarian issues on radical Islamist groups belies the reality that societal bigotry and gov-

ernment negligence also play roles in incidents of communal violence. Perceived negligence on the part of Egyptian security forces continued to be an ongoing grievance of the Christian population: for example, at the funeral for victims

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of the monastery bus attack in November, eyewitnesses reported a palpable and audible sense of anger toward police who failed to prevent the attack, despite its occurrence at a venue just one kilometer from a nearly identical and even deadlier attack on the same road in 2017. In addition, police officers are sometimes directly involved in such violence: for example, a Christian barber in Beni Suef died in police custody in July 2018 after reportedly receiving a fatal beating from officers when he attempted to report a dispute with a Muslim fellow resident. In another example, a police sergeant tasked with guarding a church in Minya gunned down a Coptic father and son at a worksite in front of his post in December, following a minor dispute. That officer was subsequently found guilty of murder charges in February 2019, after the reporting period.

The prevalence of violence against Christians in Egypt was most clearly on display in incidents of mob violence that occurred in rural towns and villages in Upper Egypt; the perpetrators were moved to action by the words of their local imams and their own deeply rooted prejudices. There were at least eight such mob

attacks in 2018: in three separate attacks in August alone, Muslim rioters attacked Coptic churches, homes, and businesses in Sultan Basha, Minya; Esna, Luxor; and Dimshaw Hashim, Minya, after reports circulated that local Christians had attempted to legally register their places of worship. Although none of these attacks resulted in outright fatalities, they caused significant property destruction and terrified local Christians. Furthermore, none of them produced legal consequences for the perpetrators; instead, by deferring to customary reconciliation sessions, local authorities made concessions to the rioters by agreeing to close the churches or prayer halls in dispute.

Discrimination and Gender-Based Violence against Coptic Christians

Apart from more overt examples of direct violence, Coptic Christians continued to face widespread societal pressures such as religious discrimination and outright bigotry. Christians continued to be underrepresented among high-ranking officers in the Egyptian police and armed forces as well as among leadership roles in public universities and the judiciary, and they have traditionally been excluded from the country's intelligence apparatus and foreign service. The appointment of a Coptic woman to the governorship of Dumyat in September 2018 was an important step forward, but she remained the only Christian among 27 governors across the country.

The most recent and illustrative example of this reality came in late December, when President El-Sisi appointed a committee to combat sectarianism. While the formation of this committee represented a generally positive,

symbolic move, it failed to include even a single representative from the country's Christian community.

Gender-based issues also play a culturally significant role in these discriminatory pressures. Some Christians continued to claim ongoing abductions of Christian women, often but not always involving coerced conversion to Islam. Although there were

fewer such reports in 2018, particularly in comparison to earlier reporting periods, they remain a persistent feature of Coptic vulnerability. It is exceedingly difficult to verify most of these reports; some may represent cases of intercommunal relationships between young Muslim men and Christian women whose families refuse to accept their choices, and others likely point to individual conversions that took place without any sort of coercion. However, some of these reports are likely authentic, particularly but not limited to those incidents involving a Coptic woman or girl who disappeared, or whose abduction was directly witnessed. Because of the stigma that both religious conversion and the sexual assault implied by forcible abductions carry in Egyptian society, regardless of the victims' religious affiliation, most of these incidents are at best difficult to document and at worst remain underreported or unreported.

Blasphemy Law and Limits on Religious Expression

Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code prohibits citizens from "ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife." Egyptian authorities continued to use this law against "contempt of religion," or blasphemy, to detain, prosecute, and imprison Muslims, Christians, atheists, and members of smaller religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs. At least five resulted in conviction in

2018, one of which was overturned on appeal.

Prosecutors also launched investigations into at least eight new cases; in five of them, the defendants remained in detention awaiting trial at the end of the reporting period.

This blasphemy law also applies to activities

that allegedly jeopardize communal harmony or vaguely insult religion, primarily Islam. Egypt's legal system allows private citizens to bring charges against fellow Egyptians to the public prosecutor for consideration, and this framework is especially susceptible to abuses of the blasphemy law. Furthermore, it is common for prosecutors to tie blasphemy-related charges to unrelated court

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cases that involve violations of the ambiguous concept of “public order.” For example, in July 2018, a Cairo court convicted a Lebanese tourist, Mona al-Mazbouh, on charges of “spreading false rumors that would harm society, attacking religion, and public indecency” for posting a video to social media in which she complained of sexual harassment during her time in Egypt. She was initially sentenced to eight years in prison for the combined charges, but that sentence was suspended and she was deported to Lebanon in September.

While the majority of those who are charged with blasphemy are Sunni Muslims, most of the individuals who are actually convicted and sentenced to prison terms on related charges are Christians, atheists, and other religious minorities. In December 2018, a Minya court found Abdo Adel, a Coptic Christian, guilty of “insulting Islam in the first degree” for a July Facebook post that reportedly compared the Prophet Muhammad to Jesus, and sentenced him to three years in prison. In a sign of the societal consequences that often surround blasphemy charges, a mob attacked Cop-

tic homes in Mr. Adel’s village after news of his arrest spread, forcing local Christians to hide for days in fear of opening their shops or emerging into public view. None of the rioters faced legal consequences following the predictable outcome of a customary reconciliation session. Meanwhile,

police have detained and released self-professed atheist Sherif Gaber several times since he was first brought up on blasphemy-related charges in 2013, including his most recent arrest and release in May 2018. According to Mr. Gaber’s own account, Egyptian authorities have since prevented him from leaving the country, and fear of long-term imprisonment has forced him into hiding.

Smaller Religious Communities: Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Converts, Jews

While Coptic Christians represent the largest non-Sunni Muslim population in Egypt, the country is also home to other, smaller religious communities who face

both unique and common ongoing pressures from the government. The Baha’i community has been formally banned for almost 60 years as a result of a decree issued by then President Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Furthermore, since Baha’i marriage is not recognized, married Baha’is still cannot obtain identity cards, making it impossible for them to register for school, own a car, or conduct daily transactions like banking. Other Baha’is can obtain identity cards only if they list a dash “-” in the required religion section since the only available options are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Egyptian officials told USCIRF during a January 2019 country visit that the status of Baha’is is a delicate matter and the government is unlikely to revoke the decree banning their recognition anytime soon. Jehovah’s Witnesses remain banned under a 1960 decree; their meetings have been allowed in private homes in groups of 30 or fewer individuals, but repeated requests for the expansion of this number have been denied or ignored. Jehovah’s Witnesses are still not allowed to have their own places of worship or import Bibles or other religious materials.

The Egyptian government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to other religions. Egyptian-born Muslims who have converted to Christianity or other religions still cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases, these converts

continue to face intense social hostility. In past cases in which converts have sued for the right to reflect their new religious affiliation on ID cards, Egyptian courts have ruled that Muslims are forbidden from converting from Islam based on principles of Islamic law because conversion would constitute an insult to Islam and threaten public order by enticing other Muslims to convert. In 2018, there also remained systemic problems for individuals who converted to Islam but then converted back to Christianity to have this change reflected on identity documents. Despite a July 2011 law making it easier to reflect one’s religion on ID cards—and not having to declare “formerly Muslim”—it remained

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exceedingly difficult in practice for these individuals to obtain identity cards. Egypt's ancient Jewish community has dwindled to near-extinction with fewer than 20 Egyptian Jews remaining in the country. While anti-Semitic sentiment remained persistent in Egyptian mass media and society at large, senior government officials made a series of public announcements in 2018 that encouraged increased tolerance toward the country's Jewish heritage. In November, President El-Sisi remarked at the World Youth Forum that Jews should have the right like Muslims and Christians to build places of worship in Egypt. The Ministry of Antiquities subsequently announced in December that the president had allotted \$72 million toward the restoration of Egypt's Jewish cultural heritage.

U.S. POLICY

The United States has a close and longstanding partnership with Egypt, extending back to the 1979 Camp David Accords. Through that partnership, the U.S. government gives \$1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt annually, in addition to lesser amounts of humanitarian and other forms of financial aid. In 2018, it also continued to partner with Egypt in military exercises, counterterrorism assistance, intelligence sharing, and other forms of cooperation, even as U.S. leadership also took personal interest in Egypt's religious freedom conditions.

In September 2018, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, President Donald J. Trump [raised the importance of religious freedom](#) and the plight of Coptic Christians during a meeting with President El-Sisi. Vice President Michael R. Pence also engaged with Egyptian officials during the reporting period, including an [official visit to Cairo in January 2018](#) and a phone call with President El-Sisi in May. During his January visit, he expressed concern and condolences over recent attacks on Coptic Christians as well as on Muslim places of worship, and in November [he explicitly condemned](#) the ISIS bus attack on Coptic pilgrims, calling such violence "cowardly assaults on the most basic freedoms of the Egyptian people."

However, in 2018, the U.S. government also repeatedly raised concerns regarding Egypt's human rights situation. In March, Congress passed the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018](#), which conditioned the disbursement of up to \$300 million in aid to Egypt on

its progress toward the promotion of democracy and human rights, including a commitment to due process and the protection of religious minorities. In May, the Senate Appropriations Committee held up that \$300 million in response to several human rights concerns, including the damaging effects of Egypt's restrictive policies regarding NGOs (Law 70/2017) and the unresolved investigation into the 2016 abduction and killing of Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni. Despite these ongoing concerns, in July 2018 the State Department ordered the release of \$195 million of the remaining military aid to Egypt.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

Egypt is making progress at a rapid pace and deserves credit for it. Both the substantive actions taken by the presidential administration and parliament, as well as President al-Sisi's important statements and symbolic actions, have together created an environment of greater religious freedom, emanating from the world's most populous Arab country and the theological heart of the Islamic world. There are reasons for optimism.

In my estimation, the two main reasons Egypt remains on Tier 2 relate to: 1) The Egyptian struggle to export Cairo's commitment to peaceful coexistence, religious freedom, and security for all religious communities to Upper Egypt, especially Minya; and 2) the need to enshrine best-intentioned practices into law and policy for other minority communities such as the Baha'is.

The relationship between Egypt's central government and its Christian and Jewish communities, including the vast diaspora of Egyptian Jews, may be at an all-time modern high. However, the government must find the capacity, and local leaders must find the will, to create the same type of environment throughout the less educated, less secure, and more sectarian parts of the country. Based upon my own engagement with the Egyptian President and senior leaders in the country, including the Coptic Orthodox Pope, the government needs more resources to address those challenges.

If the Egyptian government can—*judiciously*—resolve issues in Minya then it will have reduced significantly criticism that it receives from religious freedom communities, which will then more clearly see that the policies and priorities of Cairo have made

it throughout the country. When it comes to other minority communities such as Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses and others, I have found the communities to be complementary and supportive of the government, and yet policies carried over from Egypt's past still make it difficult for them to legally marry, establish places to worship, and fulfill other religious rites.

This is a solvable problem for the Egyptian government, particularly given that even religious leaders from Al-Azhar are now in support of such policy changes, as this report cites. The Egyptian government could, for instance, simply create an "office for special cases" in order to facilitate the marriage of Baha'is, facilitate equal rights for other religious communities, change ID cards, etc. even before the parliament is able to expand the church building law to other religious communities or enshrine other rights in the law.

If the situation in Minya were different, and if communities like the Baha'is could overcome these obstacles to full recognition, I personally believe Egypt would likely merit removal from Tier 2 altogether.