

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, despite a deteriorating human rights situation overall, including arrests of political dissidents and journalists, religious freedom conditions in Egypt largely remained the same as in 2016. President Abdelفتاح al-Sisi continued his overtures to promote religious tolerance, including attending Coptic Christmas Eve Mass for the fourth consecutive year. The government also continued its education curriculum reform process and planned to revamp the entire education system. The Egyptian government prioritized the construction and reconstruction of several prominent non-Muslim houses of worship, including St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo and the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, but as of early 2018, only 53 out of the 5,540 churches that applied had received approvals for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law. Despite positive developments, the number of blasphemy cases filed against individuals increased

in 2017 from 2016. In addition, human rights groups reported more than 120 sectarian attacks, including mob attacks against Christians and churches, and the lack of effective prosecution of perpetrators remained a serious concern. A series of attacks in 2017 by affiliates of the terrorist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targeted houses of worship, including Egypt's deadliest attack on a Sufi mosque, in Sinai, that resulted in the deaths of 305 people, and bombings and attacks against churches and Christians that resulted in almost 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. The Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness communities also remained unrecognized. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Egypt on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" 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 the churches that have applied for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law;
- Ensure that a portion of U.S. military assistance is used to help police implement an effective plan for dedicated protection for religious minority communities and their places of worship;
- Press the Egyptian government to undertake further reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including: repealing decrees banning the Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution to create an independent antidiscrimination body;
- 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 constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating article 98(f);
- Press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence through the judicial system and to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not under the jurisdiction of the domestic security agency, which should only deal with national security matters such as cases involving the use or advocacy of violence;
- Press the Egyptian government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims, including by prosecuting clerics who incite violence against Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities;
- Press the Egyptian government to continue to revise all textbooks and other educational materials to remove any language or images that promote intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on religion or belief, and include the concepts of tolerance and respect for the human rights of all individuals, including religious freedom, in all school curricula, textbooks, and teacher training;
- Provide support for education reform and teacher training initiatives;
- Provide support to human rights and other civil society or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to advance freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians;
- Place particular emphasis, in its annual reporting to Congress on human rights and religious freedom, on the Egyptian government's progress on the protection of religious minorities and the prosecution of perpetrators of sectarian violence; and
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

## COUNTRY FACTS

### FULL NAME

Arab Republic of Egypt

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

### POPULATION

97,041,072 (July 2017 estimate)

### GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam (Sunni/Shi'a), Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant)

### RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY\*

85–90% Muslim (predominantly Sunni)

10–15% Christian (majority Coptic Orthodox, other Christians include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Maronite, Orthodox, and Anglican) (2015 estimate)

\*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 97 million people, 85 to 90 percent are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than 1 percent. Ten to 15 percent are Christians, the vast majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church and less than 2 percent of whom belong to various other denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and Anglican. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 10 Jews.

Egypt has seen progress and setbacks during its political transition since 2013. In 2014, a new constitution was overwhelmingly approved by referendum, and in May 2014, Sisi was elected president. Parliamentary elections in late 2015 resulted in 39 Christians out of a 596-member House of Representatives, seated in January 2016. Presidential elections are scheduled to be held in late March 2018.

In 2017, the government's efforts to combat extremism and terrorism continued to negatively affect human

rights conditions and civil society activities. The government continued to crack down on dissent. Five individuals who attempted to run for president were either arrested or intimidated into withdrawing their candidacy. Sympathizers and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, journalists, secular and liberal activists, and opposition figures have been harassed, jailed, and given harsh prison terms, including death sentences for Brotherhood members and other Islamists, sometimes on legitimate—though other times on unfounded—security charges.

Law 70 of 2017 for Regulating the Work of Associations and Other Institutions Working in the Field of Civil Work, enacted in May 2017, prohibits NGOs from carrying out any work that may "harm national security, public order, public morality, or public health." However, none of these terms are explicitly defined. The law grants several government agencies, including the General Intelligence Directorate and the Defense and Interior Ministries, the authority to oversee NGOs, including monitoring day-to-day activities, and the power to object to an organization's choice of leadership or the scheduling of internal meetings. Relocating buildings without informing the proper authorities is subject to punishments ranging from imprisonment of one to five years, to a fine of 50,000 to 1,000,000 Egyptian pounds (approximately \$2,800 to \$56,600).

In January 2017 and March 2018, the latter after the reporting period, USCIRF delegations traveled to Egypt to assess religious freedom conditions and met with a range of Egyptian government officials, including the Minister of Education and the Minister of Religious Endowments; the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed El-Tayeb; Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church; the U.S. chargé d'affaires and other embassy officials; and members of civil society, including religious leaders, human rights defenders, and lawyers.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

### Positive Developments

In 2017, President Sisi and his government continued their efforts to highlight Egypt's religious diversity to both domestic and international audiences. For example, in May 2017, at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, President Sisi referred to Egypt as a "land of Islam, Christianity and Judaism" and "an epitome of moderate thought, tolerance and enlightenment."

For the fourth year in a row, President Sisi, along with members of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, attended Coptic Christmas Mass, held this year at the Church of the Nativity of Christ, a church being built in the new administrative capital outside of Cairo.

The Ministry of Education also continued to remove and/or clarify passages from primary school textbooks, particularly Islamic education books, deemed to promote extremist ideology. During USCIRF's March 2018 visit, the Minister of Education outlined plans to roll out over a period of several years a new education system and curriculum for primary and secondary schools starting in the fall of 2018. According to Egyptian officials, the government continued to dismantle and close down a number of private schools operated by groups teaching extremist ideology.

In both January 2017 and March 2018, USCIRF met with the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University, Ahmed El-Tayeb, who highlighted the institution's commitment to promoting religious tolerance and understanding.

The university continued to train imams and provide Islamic education, which served approximately two million primary and secondary students and 350,000–400,000 university students throughout the country, as well as approximately 35,000 students from 108 foreign countries. Al-Azhar, along with the Coptic Orthodox Church and other Christian denominations, continued to lead and participate in the Egyptian Family House. The 27-member leadership council's purpose is to engage directly with government ministers concerning public policy, and it has made special efforts to promote religious tolerance, especially in Upper Egypt. Al-Azhar, as well as the Ministry of Religious Endowments, worked with the National Council of Women, a government body focused on the advancement of women, to create a program to bring together more than 500 female Muslim lay preachers and nuns to promote religious tolerance throughout Egypt.

Regarding reform to religious discourse in society, the Egyptian government actively monitored *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by clerics. Dar al-Ifta, a govern-

ment entity headed by the Grand Mufti, continued to counter *fatwas* online that espouse radical views. It has also created its own magazine, *Insight*, as a counter-narrative to the one promoted by extremist groups. The Ministry of Religious Endowments

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and Dar al-Ifta continued to train senior imams on the skills of issuing responsible and accurate *fatwas*. Dar al-Ifta will also hold its fourth international conference in October 2018, meant to bring together imams and non-Muslim religious leaders to discuss radicalization and effective ways of countering it.

### Attacks by ISIS Affiliates

Throughout 2017, ISIS affiliates targeted Christians. In February 2017, ISIS-linked militants in the Sinai released a video inciting violence against Egypt's Christians. In April, on Palm Sunday, a bombing at St. George's Church in Tanta killed 30 people and injured 79, and a second bombing at St. Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria, the seat of the Coptic papacy, killed 17 people and injured 48. In

May, ISIS-linked militants killed a father and son in the Sinai; they shot the father and burned the son alive. Also in May, unknown gunmen killed 28 pilgrims who were en route by bus to the Monastery of St. Samuel in Minya. In October, Father Samaan Shehata, a Coptic priest, was stabbed in Cairo. In late December, ISIS militants opened fire on the Helwan Church near Cairo, killing 11 civilians and a policeman.

In 2017, ISIS affiliates also targeted Sufi Muslims in what was considered the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history. ISIS-linked militants bombed a Sufi mosque in the Sinai Peninsula and then sprayed gunfire on worshippers as they tried to escape. A total of 305 people were killed and at least 128 others were injured. Several international leaders, including President Donald Trump, offered their condolences to the Egyptian president.

President Sisi has made firm statements in the wake of terrorist attacks, particularly the ones on the Sufi mosque and Helwan Church, vowing to continue "cleansing the country of terrorism and extremism." While perpetrators of some of these incidents were arrested and/or prosecuted, accountability for all actors involved remained insufficient, as discussed below in the section on Sectarian Attacks and Impunity. Some members of the Christian community remain fearful that perpetrators may evade punishment.

During USCIRF's visit, Christian interlocutors voiced concern about the vulnerability of their facilities but had differing views about the government's ability to protect them. Some stated that the government had increased security for churches and was trying to prevent future acts of terrorism, but others said the government did not effectively protect them and that some church security personnel conducted surveillance rather than guarding the churches.

### Construction, Renovation, and Registration of Churches

In September 2016, the parliament passed and President Sisi approved a new law to regulate the construction and renovation of churches. At the time, the Coptic

Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican denominations publicly supported the law. However, some Christian and human rights organizations voiced concern that the law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no clear avenue to appeal, requires that churches be built "commensurate with" the number of Christians in an area, and allows authorities to deny construction permits if granting them would undermine "public safety." The law also creates a committee, appointed by the cabinet, to review applications to license informal or unlicensed churches, of which there are many due to the difficulty of obtaining official permits. The 10-member committee has nine government representatives (including from the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and General Intelligence Services) but just one representative from "the church" (without specifying which denomination).

A year after its passage, discontent with the law has grown. At the end of the reporting period, none of the 5,540 churches that had applied during 2017 for licenses had been approved. During the week of USCIRF's visit

in early March 2018, 53 churches were approved, with promises from officials that another 200 were to come soon after. Some Christian leaders stated that the law had been used to justify closing

down churches and had prevented maintenance of existing churches, and that the government's management of churches under Egypt's new terrorism laws had targeted their community disproportionately. However, government officials informed USCIRF that regulation of churches is necessary to ensure compliance with property and construction laws at both the city and governorate levels. Since September 2016, the government has issued four decrees to allocate land for the sole use of churches (in Port Said, Minya, Fayyoub, and South Sinai). Over the last six years, only 11 church construction permits had been awarded.

### Sectarian Attacks and Impunity

According to human rights groups, in 2017 alone there were 22 cases of attacks against churches, including many perpetrated by ISIS affiliates and others perpetrated by

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sectarian mobs. Perpetrators of these and other sectarian-related attacks continued to go largely unpunished, perpetuating an atmosphere of impunity. In some cases, instead of pursuing justice through the rule of law, local Egyptian authorities, particularly in Upper Egypt, continued to conduct “customary reconciliation” sessions between Muslims and Christians. Local authorities and Muslim and Christian religious leaders at times have abused these sessions to compel victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. Human rights groups have argued that reconciliation sessions disadvantage Christians, in some cases resulting in Christian families being forced to leave their villages and sell their property.

There were a few relevant prosecutions in 2017. In March 2017, a court sentenced Adel Soliman to death for the January 2017 murder of Coptic shopkeeper Youssef Lamei in Alexandria; at year’s end, the sentence remained under appeal. Following an attack on a Coptic Christian-owned house used as an unregistered church in Atfih village in December 2017, a court imposed on approximately 15 individuals one-year suspended sentences and fines of 500 Egyptian pounds (\$28), which they too may appeal. The court also fined the owner of the house 360,000 Egyptian pounds (\$20,500) for converting his house into a church without a license; the Archdiocese of Atfih reportedly had applied for a license for the church, which has been used for 15 years, under the 2016 Church Construction Law. In January 2018, after the reporting period, a public prosecutor filed murder charges against a man accused of killing 11 individuals in the December 2017 Helwan Coptic Church attack; the case remains ongoing. In February 2018, also after the end of the reporting period, a court confirmed a death sentence for Ahmed el-Sonbati for the October 2017 murder of Coptic Orthodox priest Fr. Samaan Shehata, after the Grand Mufti ratified the November 2017 sentence.

### Discrimination Against Christians

Discriminatory laws and policies that remain in place continued to impact Christians negatively, including the blasphemy law (discussed below) and limits on conversion from Islam. Egyptian-born Muslims who

have converted to Christianity still cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases face intense social hostility. Some Christian leaders told USCIRF of intimidation and arrests by security services when they learned of conversions. In addition, incidents of kidnappings for ransom and extortion of Christians continued to occur, particularly in Upper Egypt.

Few Christians hold positions of authority in the government. USCIRF met with the first Coptic co-chair of the parliament’s Committee for Religious Affairs and Endowments. However, only one of the 36 government ministers is Christian, and there are no Christian governors, even in Christian-majority areas. Between 1971 and 2015, there were no Christian members in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces; in 2016, the military named the first one.

### 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.” Authorities use this law to detain, prosecute, and imprison members of religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs or whose activities are alleged to jeopardize “communal harmony” or insult Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. In December 2017, a bill to ban atheism was proposed—but failed—in the parliament’s Committee on Religious

Affairs. After the reporting period, in January 2018, the Minister of Religious Endowments, Mukhtar Jum’a, publicly equated atheists with terrorists.

In 2017, there were 15 known cases and investigations under article 98(f), an increase from 2016, many involving expression on social media. While the majority of such charges in Egypt are leveled against Sunni Muslims, most of those sentenced by courts to prison terms for blasphemy have been Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and atheists. A conviction can result in a prison term of up to five years and a fine. For example, in February 2017, Sunni Muslim cleric Mohamed Abdullah al-Nasr was sentenced to five years in prison for “contempt of religion” for questioning various

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interpretations of Qur’anic texts on Facebook; at the end of the reporting period, he remained in prison pending appeal. In December 2017, Ibrahim Khalil, a 29-year-old from a Christian family, was accused of “administering a Facebook page that promotes atheism.” He was interrogated for five hours, and—as of March 2018—remained detained and under investigation.

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### Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses

The Baha’i and Jehovah’s Witness faiths have been banned since 1960 by presidential decrees. As a result, Baha’is living in Egypt are unable to meet or engage in public religious activities. In 2017, members of the community could not publicly celebrate the birthday of the Baha’i faith’s founder, Baha’u’llah. Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Center has issued *fatwas* over the years urging the continued ban on the Baha’i community and condemning its members as apostates. In recent years, the Ministry of Religious Endowments has sponsored public workshops to raise awareness about the “growing dangers” of the spread of the Baha’i faith in Egypt. The ministry sold a book at the 2017 Cairo Book Fair that discussed the dangers of the Baha’i faith.

As a policy, Baha’i marriage is not recognized because the community has no recognized spiritual institution. In January 2018, after the end of the reporting period, one Baha’i couple was awarded a marriage license after the couple took its case to the courts. Two other such cases are pending.

As reported previously, the government has permitted Jehovah’s Witnesses to meet in private homes in groups of fewer than 30 people, despite the community’s request to meet in larger numbers. Jehovah’s Witnesses are not allowed to have their own places of worship or to import Bibles and other religious literature. According to community members, this largely stems from the Coptic Church’s refusal to recognize Jehovah’s Witnesses as Christians. For the past several years, security officials continued to harass and interrogate Jehovah’s Witnesses by monitoring their activities and communications.

### Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Community

The Jewish community in Egypt is virtually extinct. According to the leader of the community in Cairo,

only five Jews remain in the capital, and three in Alexandria. In 2017, anti-Semitic content remained rampant in Egypt’s state-controlled and semi-official media, and state authorities

failed to take adequate steps to curb anti-Semitic statements. Community sites, such as synagogues and cemeteries, including the second-largest Jewish cemetery in the world, remained in dire need of renovation and repair. In a positive development, the Egyptian government is restoring the 160-year-old Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, one of the largest synagogues in the Middle East. The Ministry of Antiquities’ Project Sector is investing \$2.2 million in the project.

### U.S. POLICY

Historically, Egypt has been one of the United States’ most important allies in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, the U.S. and Egyptian governments have cooperated closely on military and counterterrorism efforts, as well as on overall regional stability. According to the Congressional Research Service, between 1946 and 2016 the United States provided Egypt with a total of \$78.3 billion in bilateral foreign aid, including \$1.3 billion a year in foreign military financing (FMF) from 1987 to the present.

President Trump has sought to improve relations with Egypt, but his administration has voiced occasional concern about Egypt’s human rights record and the NGO law in particular, as well as the detention of U.S. citizens in Egypt. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 omnibus allocates \$112.5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) to Egypt. In August 2017, the administration reprogrammed away from Egypt \$65.7 million of the FY2017 FMF funds, as well as \$30 million of FY2016 economic aid. As of March 2018, it had also delayed Egypt’s ability to use \$195 million in FY2016 FMF due to concerns about human rights and Egypt’s relationship with North Korea. For FY2019, the president has requested a total of

\$1.38 billion in foreign assistance for Egypt, almost all of which would come from the FMF account.

After the reporting period, in January 2018, Vice President Mike Pence met with President Sisi in Egypt to discuss a series of issues, including the Trump Administration's December 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which was met with criticism in Egypt. Pope Tawadros II and the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb refused to meet with the vice president during his visit. The vice president also highlighted the continued detention of two U.S. citizens in Egypt and the shared fight against terrorism. In November 2017, President Trump offered his sympathy for the attack on the Sufi mosque in Sinai, calling it a "horrible and cowardly terrorist attack on innocent and defenseless" worshippers and emphasizing that terrorism and its ideological roots must be defeated.

According to State Department officials, the U.S. government continues to prioritize religious freedom concerns with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior. This includes urging the government to hold the perpetrators of sectarian crimes accountable, repeal article 98(f) on blasphemy, and prevent discrimination against and the intimidation of Egypt's smallest religious minority groups. It has also emphasized the need to accelerate the approvals under the 2016 Church Law. The State Department also welcomed anticipated changes to the education curriculum, as well as religious institutions' commitment to curbing extremism and terrorism. Finally, the U.S. Embassy continues to support programs seeking to encourage and promote religious tolerance, including among youth.