

EGYPT 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution describes freedom of belief as “absolute” but only provides adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism the right to practice their religion freely and to build houses of worship. The government does not recognize conversion from Islam by citizens born Muslim to any other religion and imposes legal penalties on Muslim-born citizens who convert. While there is no legal ban on efforts to proselytize Muslims, the government uses the penal code’s prohibition of “denigrating religions” to prosecute those who proselytize publicly, often adopting an overly expansive interpretation of denigration, according to human rights groups. The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. It requires parliament to pass a law on the construction and renovation of Christian churches and provides for the establishment of an antidiscrimination commission, both of which had yet to be completed by year’s end. The government failed to respond to or prevent sectarian violence in some cases, in particular outside of major cities, according to rights advocates. Government officials frequently participated in informal “reconciliation sessions” to address incidents of sectarian violence and tension, saying such sessions prevented further violence. Such sessions, however, regularly led to outcomes unfavorable to minority parties, and precluded recourse to the judicial system in most cases, according to human rights groups. Some religious minorities reported an increase in harassment by government entities as compared with last year. Some government entities used anti-Shia, anti-Bahai, and anti-atheist rhetoric, and the government regularly failed to condemn anti-Semitic commentary. Actions of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – seen by Christian leaders as positive signals that Christians are full members of Egyptian society – included calls for imams and scholars to promote tolerant Islamic teachings, a visit to the main Coptic Orthodox cathedral on Christmas Eve, and initiatives following the beheading of 20 Egyptian Copts in Libya by an affiliate of Da’esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Government and religious institutions responded to Sisi’s call for tolerance with some efforts to limit language promoting sectarianism or violence. At the expense of the government, the military completed the rebuilding of 26 of the 78 churches and other Christian properties burned by Islamist-led mobs following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in 2013.

Religious minorities continued to face significant threats of sectarian violence according to religious and human rights groups. One Muslim family reportedly killed a family member for her alleged conversion to Christianity. Individuals

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accused of denigration of religion often faced social intolerance and, in some cases, violence. Societal resistance to the building and rebuilding of churches occurred, including in El-'Our where President Sisi had publicly approved the construction of a church in honor of the 20 Egyptian Copts killed in Libya. Societal anti-Semitic actions included desecration of a Jewish cemetery. Hateful speech against minority religious groups continued.

The President, Secretary of State, Ambassador, and other senior U.S. officials emphasized the importance of advancing religious freedom and highlighted the government's responsibility to honor the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion. During a visit in November, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom publicly stated the U.S. government's opposition to blasphemy laws and called for their universal repeal. In meetings with government officials and civil society leaders in Cairo, he emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised cases of particular concern with the government. The U.S. government funded projects and exchange programs to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Embassy officers regularly engaged on questions of religious freedom with representatives of a wide range of religious groups and advocates.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 88.4 million (July 2015 estimate). Most media reports state that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 percent Christian (estimates range from 5 percent to 15 percent). Approximately 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders. Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population and include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Greek, Roman, and Syrian), Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), Anglican/Episcopalian, and Protestant Churches, which range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. The Protestant community includes Presbyterians, Baptists, Brethren, Open Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria, according to religious and civil society groups.

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

Some press reports estimate the number of atheists to be as high as four million, although other accounts place their number in the low thousands.

Accurate numbers for the Jewish community are difficult to determine, but it is believed to number no more than 30 persons, according to a member of the community. There are 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and between 2,000 and 3,000 Bahais, according to media estimates.

There are many foreign resident adherents of various religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). There is also a small Dawoodi (a branch of Ismaili Shia) Bohra Community, numbering approximately 660, mostly comprising Indian nationals, according to a member of the community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The constitution describes freedom of belief as absolute; however, it limits the freedom to practice religious rituals to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, to which it refers as "the divine religions."

While neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit efforts to proselytize Muslims, according to a 2008 court ruling that tested the constitutional provision of religious freedom, conversion from Islam is apostasy and forbidden based on principles of sharia. This ruling was followed by a second 2008 ruling that allowed for conversion from Islam for individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam. 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, automatically remain classified as Muslims.

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In keeping with sharia, non-Muslim men must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. A non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert. Custody of children is then awarded to the mother.

According to article 98(f) of the penal code, using religion to promote extremist thought with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning or denigrating any of “the divine religions,” and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment.

Christian, Muslim, and Jewish denominations can request official recognition from the government, which gives the denomination the right to be governed by its canonical laws, practice religious rituals, and establish houses of worship. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) 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 nation’s premier institution of Islamic education. The registration is then referred to the president for decision.

The law does not recognize the Bahai Faith or its religious laws and bans Bahai institutions and community activities. A presidential decree bans all Jehovah’s Witnesses’ activities.

The government has the authority to appoint and monitor imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and pays their salaries. According to law, penalties for preaching Islam without a license include a prison term of up to one year and/or a fine of up to 50,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (\$6,390) for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) or Al-Azhar. The penalty doubles for repeat offenders. Ministry of Awqaf inspectors also have judicial authority to arrest imams violating this law. A decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters (861 square feet), bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services, and requires Friday sermons to follow government guidelines.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) bans the hijab in primary schools, but allows it in middle and high schools upon written request from a girl’s parent. Cairo

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University, which falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, bans professors in certain fields from wearing the *niqab*.

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

The constitution provides the right to establish houses of worship only to the three “divine religions.”

According to law, the president must issue a decree authorizing the construction of new churches, while the local Office of the District Authority must approve renovations and repairs. An MOI decree specifies 10 conditions the government must consider before authorizing construction, including that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) to an existing mosque and that Christian communities in Muslim-majority neighborhoods obtain local approval before applying to the president for authorization to build a church. According to the law, the Ministry of Awqaf approves permits to build mosques. A new mosque may be no closer than 500 meters (1,640 feet) to an existing mosque, according to a law on mosque construction.

In public schools, Muslim students are required to take courses on “principles of Islam,” and Christian students are required to take courses on “principles of Christianity” in all grades. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other.

The constitution states that Al-Azhar is “the main authority in theology and Islamic affairs.” The constitution stipulates that the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.

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The constitution stipulates equality before the law irrespective of one's religion. It also stipulates that discrimination and incitement of hatred is a crime punishable by law.

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 government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Since the state does not recognize Bahai marriage, married Bahais are denied the legal rights of married couples of other religious beliefs, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse's permanent residence.

The law stipulates that spouses must be members of the same denomination within a religion for courts to apply its canonical laws. In cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other a member of a different religion, or both are Christians but adhere to different religious groups within Christianity, the courts apply sharia. All citizens remain subject to sharia in matters of inheritance. No one may adopt an Egyptian child, as sharia prohibits the practice.

In accordance with the constitution, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are the only three religions which may be indicated in the religion field on national identity cards. According to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order, officials may enter a "dash" in this field for individuals who adhere to the Bahai Faith.

According to the House of Representatives law, a minimum of 24 Christians must be elected out of the total 120 members elected as members of party lists in the first parliamentary elections after the constitution's 2014 ratification.

The quasigovernmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements pertaining to human rights. The council's mandate includes investigating reports of alleged violations of religious freedom.

The constitution mandates the state to eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by the parliament. The constitution, approved by referendum in 2014, mandates that during the first legislative term

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after the constitution comes into effect, the parliament must issue a law to facilitate the construction and renovation of Christian churches. Parliament was seated in December but did not issue any laws by the end of the year.

Government Practices

The government frequently failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes targeting members of religious minority groups, which fostered a climate of impunity, according to a prominent local rights organization. The government often failed to protect Christians targeted by kidnappings and extortion according to sources in the Christian community, and there were reports that security and police officials sometimes failed to respond to these crimes, especially in Upper Egypt. Government representatives continued to participate in and sometimes lead informal “reconciliation sessions” to address incidents of sectarian violence and tension, which adopted findings favoring members of the majority Muslim community most of the time, according to human rights groups. The government increased its prosecution of individuals for denigrating religions, according to statistics compiled by a prominent rights group. TV host Islam El-Beheiry was sentenced to one-year imprisonment for denigrating religion after criticizing some elements of Islamic texts, according to a human rights group. The government held Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity, in pretrial detention without charges beyond the six-month legal limit for misdemeanors. The government continued to prohibit conversion from Islam by those born Muslim. Some minority religious groups reported increased government harassment. Some government officials, including those at Al-Azhar, vilified Shia and atheists. The government failed to condemn anti-Semitic speech. Actions and statements of President Sisi, however, were seen by Christian leaders as positive messages that Christians were full members of society.

Police failed to act in the face of victimization of Christians in Upper Egypt who were disproportionately targeted for kidnapping and extortion, according to human rights activists and Christian leaders, although there were some reports of police successfully securing the release of kidnapped Christians. In November a local human rights organization stated that unknown assailants kidnapped a Christian man from Al-Manah, Qena, detained him for three days, tortured him, and attempted to coerce him to convert to Islam. The man’s family paid the kidnappers 50,000 EGP (\$6,390) and the man was released. The local human rights organization said that local police failed to act in this case and more broadly in the face of kidnappings of Christians in parts of Qena.

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On August 8, police were able to secure the release of four kidnapped Christians in Samalot, Minya a day after they were kidnapped. Police thwarted an attempted kidnapping of a Christian on January 26 in Tema, Sohag, arresting three would-be kidnappers. In May police secured the release of an eight-year-old Christian child after he spent 17 days held by kidnappers in Naga Hammadi, Qena.

The police in Samalot, Minya, did not act on complaints of a Christian family when their 5-year-old son was kidnapped on October 21 and failed to pursue the kidnappers, according to an international rights organization. The kidnappers released the child after his family paid 45,000 EGP (\$5,625).

On June 13, Giza Criminal Court sentenced 23 defendants to 14 years in prison for the June 2013 killing of four Shia, including prominent Shia cleric Hassan Shehata, in the village of Zawyat Abu Muslam in Giza. The court found the defendants guilty of the murder of the four individuals and the attempted murder of 13 others. The court also acquitted eight defendants of the charges. The killings took place in the midst of violence that erupted in 2013 following months of Shia denigration by Salafist preachers and the then-ruling Muslim Brotherhood, according to a human rights organization. No one was prosecuted for inciting violence against the victims and their community, according to the same human rights group.

The government broadly applied article 98(f) of the penal code to prosecute individuals whose statements or actions were alleged to have been blasphemous, denigrated religion, or insulted the Prophet Muhammad or other religious figures. Government prosecutors investigated criminal complaints filed by private citizens on such charges, leading to prosecution of at least 20 individuals and convictions of at least eight individuals during the year. The number of prosecuted cases was significantly higher than in previous years, according to a local human rights organization.

Government officials continued to sponsor “reconciliation sessions” after sectarian attacks and intercommunal violence, including in blasphemy cases, instead of prosecuting the perpetrators of the crimes. Such reconciliation sessions precluded recourse to the judicial system since, in most cases, the parties agreed to drop all formal charges and lawsuits as stipulated by the terms of the session.

For example, in April a Muslim resident of El-Naseriya village in Minya Governorate filed a police complaint accusing four Christian high school students

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and their teacher, Gad Youssef Younan, of denigrating Islam in a video in which the students reportedly pretended to pray in accordance with Islam and mocked Da'esh. A local human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that on April 7, police arrested Younan on charges of denigrating Islam, and Younan's immediate family left the village shortly after the arrest, reportedly due to fear of retribution. On April 10, Muslim residents of El-Naseriya held a demonstration in protest of the video, throwing rocks at Christian-owned houses, according to media reports. The same day, local police arrested the four students (aged 16-17) said to be involved in the creation of the video, which some human rights advocates stated was an attempt by the police to pacify Muslim protestors. El-Naseriya's mayor led a reconciliation session on April 17, in which local Christian and Muslim leaders and security officials agreed that Younan should be expelled from El-Naseriya and his family should not be allowed to return, according to the local rights organization. During the session, local Christian clergy also issued a formal apology for the video. Younan and the four students were released on 10,000 EGP (\$1,277) bail each on May 14 and 27, respectively. Upon his release, Younan departed El-Naseriya. Prosecutors referred the case to Bani Mazar Misdemeanor Court which, on December 31, sentenced Younan to three-years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 EGP (\$24) for denigrating religion. The four students' trial on the same charge continued at the end of the year, according to their lawyer.

Police arrested 18-year-old student Maher Fayez from the village of Miyana, Beni Suef, on May 13, for denigrating Islam via a post he published on Facebook, according to a prominent local Christian news outlet. After his arrest, a Muslim villager printed and distributed Fayez's post, and publicly called for violence against Fayez, according to the outlet. During the subsequent investigation, Fayez denied that he published the post, and said his account was hacked. According to media reports, in an attempt to abate increasing tension and deter violence, local government and religious leaders led a reconciliation session at the Miyana police station in which participants agreed that Fayez's family should leave the village, which they did. On June 4, local leaders held a second reconciliation session in which they overturned their previous decision and agreed that Fayez's family could return to Miyana, which they did the same day. The Beni Suef prosecutor released Fayez on November 15, six months after he was detained, according to the press, at the limit of the maximum pretrial detention period for misdemeanors.

In May a Muslim resident of Kafr Darwish, Beni Suef, filed a legal complaint against Ayman Tawfik, a Christian Egyptian resident of Jordan with family ties to Kafr Darwish, accusing him of denigrating Islam, after Tawfik reportedly

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published a Facebook post, which some Muslims said was offensive to the Prophet Muhammad. Violence erupted between Muslim and Christian residents after the complaint was filed, according to a local human rights organization. Local village elders and Muslim and Christian religious leaders held a reconciliation session on May 22 in which participants agreed that Tawfik's family should pay a fine of 50,000 EGP (\$6,390). According to media reports, on May 24, a second reconciliation session resulted in the expulsion of Tawfik's immediate family. The following day, according to the human rights NGO, some Muslim villagers threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at Christian-owned houses. A subsequent reconciliation session on May 27, determined that Tawfik's extended family should also be expelled. After three weeks, the Governor of Beni Suef and the Mayor of Kafr Darwish announced Tawfik's family should be allowed to return and the local government would oversee the return, open an investigation into the incident, and provide compensation for the damages to Christian properties, according to media reports. According to a local rights group, public outcry against the displacement of the families put pressure on local leadership to overturn the displacement decision. Tawfik's family returned to Kafr Darwish on June 3. According to the local human rights NGO, however, as of the end of the year, no compensation had been disbursed to the families and no investigation had been initiated into the attacks on Christian-owned property. The legal investigation of the denigration case against Tawfik remained ongoing.

On May 31, Old Cairo Misdemeanor Court sentenced TV host Islam El-Beheiry to five years' imprisonment for denigrating religions. Upon appeal on December 28, the Al-Gamaliya Appellate Misdemeanor Court reduced the sentence to one year. Prosecutors had pressed charges against El-Beheiry after a lawyer filed a complaint accusing him of denigrating Islam because of his critique of Islamic texts which he said had links to violence, including certain *hadith*, on his show *Ma'a Islam (With Islam)*, which aired on Al-Qahera Wal-Nas satellite channel. According to press reports, nearly 50 additional legal complaints were filed against El-Beheiry, including by the Ministry of Awqaf and Al-Azhar. In addition, after receiving a complaint from Al-Azhar, the Free Media Zone, the government agency concerned with satellite channels, issued Al-Qahera Wal-Nas a warning. In an April 24 statement announcing its termination of El Beheiry's show, the satellite channel stated it took that action in response to the grand imam of Al-Azhar and "out of respect to a large faction of the Egyptian people."

Prosecutors did not file charges against Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity previously known as Mohamed Hegazy, but repeatedly

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ordered his continued pretrial detention based on accusations that he denigrated Islam in a symposium in 2009. According to his lawyer, Boulous was being held illegally, having exceeded the maximum pretrial detention period of six months. Boulous was initially sentenced to five years in prison in 2013 for “illegally filming demonstrations to stir international public opinion against Egypt.” In December 2014, the appellate court accepted Boulous’ appeal of his sentence on the illegal filming charge and reduced it to one year. During the appeal process, Boulous was released by order of the appellate court in July 2014 pending a decision on the appeal. Upon his release, police immediately rearrested Boulous based on accusations of denigration of Islam in 2009. On May 12, the press carried a statement by Boulous’ lawyer that he had been physically beaten and verbally abused by prison officials because of his conversion to Christianity. The lawyer also told press that Boulous was denied a Bible and prescription glasses. According to a human rights advocate, Boulous’ re-arrest and continued detention were due to his conversion to Christianity. Boulous was previously known for suing the Ministry of Interior (MOI) in 2007 for not allowing him to change his legal religious identity from Muslim to Christian. The administrative court ruled in favor of the MOI.

On July 10 in Alexandria, three young Christian men, one of whom was 16, were arrested on charges of denigration of Islam after one of the three distributed flyers containing an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount. According to a local human rights group and press reports, a Muslim man detained one of the men, assaulted him physically, locked him in a store for more than an hour, and then took him to a police station. The youth called two Christian friends who joined him at the police station, and who were then detained. The three were then referred to prosecutors on suspicion of “defamation of religions and new ways of proselytizing among Muslims,” according to press reports. All three were released on a bail of 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,250) each on July 12.

The Edko Misdemeanor Court sentenced student Karim El-Banna, 21, to three years’ imprisonment on January 10 for denigrating religions by publishing posts allegedly critical of Islam on Facebook. According to a local human rights organization, El-Banna – reported to be an atheist – was arrested in November 2014 after he attempted to file a police complaint against a group of his neighbors for harassing him for his personal beliefs. Police then detained El-Banna on charges that reportedly had been issued against him at an earlier time for the posts. According to the local rights organization, El-Banna’s father testified against him in court under pressure from friends and family. Human Rights Watch said El-

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Banna's lawyers appealed the verdict, and the court released him on bail of EGP 1,000 (\$145). El-Banna's appeal process was ongoing at the end of the year. El-Banna's name had been published by Al Bawaba News website in 2014 as one of a number of people who publicly professed their atheism on Facebook, as part of a campaign calling on atheists to go public with their beliefs.

On May 17, the Daqahlia Talkha Appellate Misdemeanor Court sentenced a retired doctor to six months in prison and two others to five years in prison for denigrating religions and "adhering to the Shia faith," according to the press. The latter two were sentenced in absentia and received the maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment. According to press reports, the prosecution filed the charges after police apprehended two of the absentee defendants – the two who were later released and sentenced in absentia – whom they said transported 54 books and 100 CDs containing Shia teachings to the retired doctor in 2013.

On March 22, the Court of Cassation upheld a five-year prison sentence for Salafist televangelist Sheikh Ahmed Abdullah, also known as Sheikh Abu Islam, for burning a copy of the Bible after encouraging a child to urinate on it during protests outside the U.S. embassy in 2012. Abu Islam was also sentenced to six months' imprisonment in a separate case for defaming Christianity on TV in 2014.

The government effectively prevented some religious practices and speech through the use of politically motivated legal action, according to some religious and human rights groups. Officers from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology's Censorship Department detained Farid Samir, Executive Director of SAT-7 Egypt on October 10 (SAT-7 Egypt is the local affiliate of SAT-7, a Christian satellite television station). Samir was released after several hours, but faced charges related to operating a satellite TV station without a proper permit, according to SAT-7. Officers also confiscated SAT-7 equipment and materials after presenting a search warrant, effectively stopping the channel's live broadcast from the country through the end of the year.

On July 14, the Ministry of Awqaf banned well-known Muslim preacher Mohamed Gebreel from leading prayer and religious lessons at mosques, accusing him of incitement and extremist speech. In its announcement of the ban, the ministry stated Gebreel had violated ministry instructions by "using worship for political purposes in a manner supportive of extremist thought." According to the press, Gebreel had led worshippers at Amr Ibn Al-As mosque in prayer on July 13, saying, "God protect us from corrupt media, the ignorance of rulers, and preachers who

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lead us astray.” Airport authorities prevented Gebreel from traveling on July 15, according to media reports. The media also reported that Gebreel filed a complaint on July 25, and on October 27 an administrative court lifted the ban, stating in its decision that the travel ban was a violation of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement which had been imposed without a court order.

The Ministry of Social Solidarity (MOSS), the authority responsible for NGO registration, announced on May 6 the formation of a committee tasked with investigating NGOs that allegedly practice or promote Shia religious rites. The law regulating NGOs prohibits the establishment of unions or federations for religious purposes. There were no reports that MOSS investigated NGOs allegedly affiliated with other religious rites. On May 19, police raided an NGO run by Shia community leader Taher El-Hashemi, after reportedly receiving information the NGO was promoting Shia Islam and broadcasting without a proper license. The press reported police confiscated books that incited hatred against Sunni Islam and carried Shia ideas. Police arrested El-Hashemi and detained him briefly before releasing him on May 20 on bail of 1,000 Egyptian pounds (\$128), according to press reports. The press also reported that the prosecution charged El-Hashemi with possessing unlicensed books promoting Shia Islam. On April 30, the MOSS undersecretary in Sharqia Governorate dismissed the board of directors of a preschool suspected of promoting Shia Islam.

The government prosecuted and convicted the perpetrators of some of the attacks on churches that took place in the aftermath of the forcible dispersal of Muslim Brotherhood-led sit-ins in Cairo and Giza 2013. Approximately 78 churches and other Christian-owned properties had been attacked by Islamist-led mobs. On September 3, the Sohag Criminal Court sentenced 26 defendants to life imprisonment, 67 to 15 years and 26 others to 10-years’ imprisonment for setting fire to the Sohag Coptic Orthodox Diocese’s services building and St. George’s Church in Sohag, as well as armed assault against police. On April 29, the Giza Criminal Court sentenced 71 defendants to life imprisonment for breaking into and burning down the Virgin Mary Church in Kerdasa, Giza, and other crimes including illegal possession of firearms and attempted murder. The court also sentenced two juveniles to 10 years in prison on the same charges. Fifty-two of the defendants were sentenced in absentia.

Members of religious groups without official registration and which continued to hold meetings reported they faced detention and prosecution for harming social cohesion or denigrating religions. The government did not prevent members of

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unrecognized churches, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, from worshipping privately in small numbers. Representatives of one of these groups, however, reported increased harassment by government officials, primarily via increasingly frequent threatening phone calls. According to Jehovah's Witnesses community leaders, they were not allowed to gather for worship services in groups of more than 30 people.

The government prevented religious practice at key sites in connection with some religious holidays. The Ministry of Awqaf closed the Imam Hussein Shrine for a three-day period surrounding the October observation of Ashura. The ministry's October 22 statement explaining the closure described Shia practice as "falsehoods" with "no relation to Islam." In connection with the closure, Awqaf Undersecretary Sheikh Mohamed Abdel-Razek described Shia practices as "hocus-pocus [such as] slapping their faces and chests, weeping and other acts that contradict the religion."

For the fifth consecutive year, authorities cancelled an annual Jewish pilgrimage, including the participation of many Israeli citizens, to the shrine of 19th-century scholar Rabbi Yaakov Abu Hassira. The cancellation occurred following an administrative court decision to ban permanently the Abu Hassira festival in December 2014. The court justified its decision by stating the festival was a "violation of public order and morals" and "incompatible with the solemnity and purity of religious sites."

On Orthodox Christmas Eve, January 7, President Sisi visited worshipers at St. Mark's Cathedral, the country's main Coptic Orthodox cathedral, becoming the first president ever to do so and sending a positive signal of religious inclusion, according to religious leaders and rights groups. During his visit, Sisi said that all Egyptians are equal.

On January 1, in an address at the Ministry of Awqaf on the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, President Sisi called on the country's scholars and imams to dispense with Islamic texts that espoused violence and to promote tolerant Islamic teaching as part of a "renewal of religious discourse."

At another event marking the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on December 22, President Sisi told Al-Azhar scholars to refute "malicious ideas and warped interpretation," teach "that tolerance does not contradict religion [Islam] and that accepting the other does not oppose faith," one that benefits all mankind. The

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president also said that everyone should have the freedom to choose what religion and belief to follow without fear: “Are we custodians of people’s minds or choices? No we are not, especially not in religious matters.”

In December the Official Gazette announced that, beginning January 1, 2016, 1,000 EGP (\$128) per month will be paid to imams who deliver sermons that fulfill the instructions of the Ministry of Awqaf. While Ministry of Awqaf officials stated the move would help imams focus on their battle against violent extremism, it was criticized by a human rights group as part of an effort to monopolize Islamic discourse.

The government continued to ban the importation and sale of Shia and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature.

On September 26, the Middle East Freedom Forum announced that Al-Azhar and Ministry of Awqaf officials had effectively stopped the distribution of a book the Forum had published in March on “denigration of religion in Egypt.” The book, *Blasphemy in Egypt*, was authored by longtime religious freedom lawyer and activist Hamdy El-Assiuty and activist Magdy Khalil. In a Facebook post, the Forum stated that officials from both institutions warned the bookstore selling the book that the book “insulted Islam.” The Forum added that it subsequently withdrew the book in response to the bookstore’s request. The Forum described the actions of the officials as “a flagrant violation of freedom of thought, expression and press.” In an interview on October 4, Minister of Culture Helmy El-Namnam denied the book was withdrawn due to Al-Azhar and Ministry of Awqaf action, and said it was taken off the shelves due to lack of sales.

The military completed restoration of 26 of the 78 churches and other Christian buildings attacked after the forcible dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led sit-ins in Cairo and Giza in August 2013, according to a Christian representative with a leadership role in the restoration process. Private citizens restored an additional 23, he also reported. A total of 29 buildings in 24 locations were yet to be restored. In August 2013, the government had announced the army would rebuild destroyed churches at its expense.

On July 2, Cairo University restricted Islamic prayer on campus to one mosque under Ministry of Awqaf supervision. University President Gaber Nassar told the press that the decision was aimed at stopping “extremist thought on campus,” which he said emanated from some small mosques, or prayer *zawiyas*, on campus.

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In response to President Sisi's January 1 call for a "religious revolution" to combat extremism, then-Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehlab created a curriculum development committee, over which he personally presided, on March 4. The committee's members included the grand mufti, the ministers of education, higher education and *awqaf*, and the president of the Azharite Institutes Sector. On March 18, according to the committee's recommendations, the Ministry of Education began removing texts from primary and middle school curricula which it said "incite violence and extremism," including passages on Salaheddin (Saladin), a Muslim ruler who confronted the Crusaders; and another on Uqba ibn Nafi, a seventh-century Arab general who began the Islamic conquest of North Africa. According to several Christian clergy, the majority of such texts had been removed from texts used by the Ministry of Education as of the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. They noted, however, that some public school teachers continued to refer to such texts in practice. Al-Azhar Undersecretary Abbas Shouman stated in a June interview that Al-Azhar had completed updating and modernizing its school curricula, asserting that changes would be reflected in Al-Azhar textbooks used in the 2016-2017 school year.

The government changed the official religion of minors to Islam whenever at least one parent converted to Islam, regardless of whether the parent in question had custody, according to a religious freedom lawyer. In cases when the mother had converted, the government violated the law in so doing, as the law required the consent of the legal guardian of a minor before changing his or her records, and the law assigned guardianship to the father, according to the same lawyer. Some children who were legally identified as Muslims but who self-identified as Christians and lived in Christian homes were forced to attend religion classes for Muslim students, which entailed memorizing and reciting Islamic texts, among other coerced Islamic activities which violated their consciences, Christian representatives reported. They also stated that such children could not be admitted to a Christian orphanage. Additionally, children who were legally identified as Muslim but grew up in Christian homes had no recourse to choose with which religion to be legally identified when they reached the legal age.

The government discriminated against religious minorities in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities, according to academic sources. They also stated no Christians served as presidents of the country's 17 public universities and few Christians occupied dean or vice dean positions in the public university system. Only Muslims could study at Al-Azhar University, a publicly

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funded institution. Additionally, the government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Quran.

The total number of members of parliament was 596, of whom 568 were elected, including 120 chosen through coalition or party lists, and 28 were appointed by President Sisi. Thirty-six Christians were elected to parliament, and two were appointed.

In a phone interview on the ONTV Channel on May 13, Cairo University President Gaber Nassar stated there were no Christian faculty members in the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department. Nassar acknowledged that while there was no law preventing the appointment of Christians in the department, it was possibly part of the department's "culture." Nassar's comments came in response to an op-ed published on the same day by columnist and physician Khaled Montassar, who decried the lack of Christians teaching in the obstetrics and gynecology departments nationwide due to what he perceived as unspoken discriminatory customs among faculty members.

Christians who converted to Islam and then back to Christianity continued to be able to amend their national identification cards to reflect their chosen faith, according to an MOI decree pursuant to a court order. Some Christians, however, reported difficulty or long delays in obtaining the paperwork needed to complete the process, which a prominent lawyer stated was due to government pressure against church authorities.

Government officials sometimes made disparaging remarks about minority religious groups. On February 15, Minister of Awqaf Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa said that "the enemies of religion and the nation" were nurturing extremism, atheism, and "destructive sects" such as the Bahai Faith and Ismailis. Gomaa also said that Bahais had "close relations with Zionists" and his ministry held training sessions to spread awareness "on the dangers of these ideas on religion and national security." On March 15, the minister equated atheism with terrorism, and said the two were promoted by "invisible powers" with the aim of destroying the military, economic, and intellectual structures of Arab societies. In a December statement, Al-Azhar stated that it objected to the spreading of Shia Islam in the country, and considered it "political intervention in a Sunni country."

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The government generally failed to take action against or condemn anti-Semitic comments that appeared in both government-owned and private media. For example, on November 15, Al-Hayat satellite channel television host Iman Izz Al-Din said that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the leader of Da'esh, was a Jew. On October 27, El-Rahma television host Muhammad Khaled said “The history of the Jews has been black since the dawn of time. Nebuchadnezzar burned them, the Crusaders burned them, and even Hitler and Nazism burned them.” Then he asked his interviewee, professor of Islamic history at Cairo University Yusri Ahmad Zidan, whether “burning was the only solution for the Jews.” Zidan responded, “So it seems.”

During the parliamentary elections, a leading member of a prominent electoral coalition said in a conference in November that a member of an opponent coalition adhered to the Shia sect of Islam, and rhetorically asked the attendees, “Do we want to allow Shia into the parliament?”

The government generally tolerated foreign religious workers on the condition they did not undertake efforts to proselytize Muslims. Sources stated non-Muslim minorities and foreign religious workers generally refrained from proselytizing to avoid risking legal penalties and extralegal repercussions from authorities and local Islamists.

The government sometimes participated in or failed to prosecute desecration of religious property. On April 3, security forces entered and vandalized the House of St. Youssef al-Bar, a property owned by the Archbishopric of Maghagha and al-Adwa, saying the site had no building permit, according to a local human rights group. The archbishopric issued a statement saying it had received the necessary permits.

Following the beheading of 20 Egyptian Copts in Libya by an Da'esh affiliate, President Sisi approved the state-funded construction of a church in their honor, announced a seven-day period of national mourning, and declared them “martyrs,” entitling their families to each receive 100,000 EGP (\$12,700) and a monthly stipend of 1,500 EGP (\$192). He promised “retribution for the killers” after which Egypt conducted air strikes against Da'esh in Libya. According to a human rights activist, that response ran counter to ideas espoused by hardline Islamist groups in the country, which hold Muslims should not be killed in retaliation for the killing of Christians. President Sisi sent a number of senior officials, including then-Prime Minister Mehlab and then-Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, to visit the

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families of victims. Authorities announced streets would be named after some of the victims.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Lethal sectarian violence continued over the year, and included the killing of a convert to Christianity by her Muslim family and the targeting of Christians in North Sinai based on their religious identity. The construction of churches continued to be met with societal resistance, including acts of violence. Such violence occurred in connection with construction of a new church approved by the president in El-‘Our, the village from which came a majority of the 20 Egyptian Copts killed in Libya in February. In many cases, individuals charged with denigration of religion also faced societal violence or threats of violence, according to Christian leaders. Anti-Semitic actions included the desecration of a Jewish cemetery. Hate speech in the media against Shia increased, according to a human rights group, and some Salafist groups adopted rhetoric targeting Christians, Jews, and Shia Muslims, according to media reports.

On November 18, the Muslim uncles and cousins of a 26-year-old convert to Christianity killed her for conversion and marriage to a Christian man, according to press reports. Her father, who had tried to protect her from her uncles and cousins, reported to police they killed her, press reported. Prosecutors and police officers started an investigation. Following the killing, the press reported that senior security officials, the family of the victim, and her Christian husband’s family held a reconciliation session to avoid further sectarian violence in the village. The victim’s Muslim family reportedly demanded that the husband’s Christian family move out of the village permanently. The outcome was unclear at year’s end.

While on duty, two Christian conscripts in their early twenties allegedly committed suicide on June 24 and November 20. According to official forensics reports, one of the conscripts died of multiple gunshot wounds, and the other hanged himself. The families of the conscripts publicly rejected the investigations carried out by the army, charged that their family members were murdered, and stated that they believed that the conscripts’ religious identity was the reason for their killing. Additionally, a Christian news outlet reported that a third Christian conscript was killed by a Muslim colleague on August 23, after a religious discussion led to a disagreement between the two. The Muslim conscript confessed to the killing, and the prosecutor’s office ordered his arrest.

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Christians in North Sinai were specifically targeted in violent acts and regularly received threats to leave the region or be killed based on their religious identity, according to a Christian advocacy group with a presence in the region. Two Christian men were killed in Arish, one on January 30 and one on February 23, according to the advocacy group. Da'esh claimed responsibility for the killing of the second. Families of the victims filed complaints with local law enforcement, but no arrests were made. A total of 27 Christian families left Arish in fear of more attacks as a direct response to the January and February killings, according to the advocacy group. Masked assailants reportedly raided and burned a Christian-owned house to the ground in Arish on February 12.

Khaled El-Shabrawy, a Sufi scholar, stated that according to sharia it would be permissible to kill TV host Islam El-Beheiry, who was accused of denigrating Islam, because he offended the symbols of Islam. Salafist figures also filed complaints against El-Beheiry, including Salafist Call Vice President Yasser Borhami. Al-Azhar and the *awqaf* ministry rejected El-Shabrawy's remarks. In a statement, the ministry affirmed that only the judiciary had the authority to issue death sentences. Following the outcry, Shabrawy disavowed his comments.

In El-'Our, Minya, on March 27, dozens of villagers protested the building of the new church in honor of the Egyptian Christians beheaded by Da'esh militants in Libya in February. President Sisi had approved the construction of the church, responding to calls by Coptic Orthodox Church figures. A Coptic Orthodox clergyman from the region stated that protestors besieged the village's current church with the pastor and some of his family inside. According to a prominent human rights group, the protestors were armed, threw Molotov cocktails at the church, and set fire to a Christian-owned vehicle. Protestors also threw bricks at the house of one of the Christian victims, the press reported. Minya Governor Salah El-Din Ziada organized reconciliation sessions on March 28 and 29 attended by senior MOI officials, representatives of El-'Our's Christian and Muslim communities, and local clergy. The result of the reconciliation sessions was a decision to build the church near the east end of the village rather than the originally proposed location at the village's entrance. On April 1, Ziada inaugurated the construction of the church. Following the reconciliation session, Christian villagers withdrew complaints against seven Muslim protestors who were arrested in the aftermath of the demonstrations. The suspects were subsequently released.

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During a reconciliation session on March 3, Muslim villagers of El-Galaa village told their fellow Christian residents that if they wished to demolish and rebuild their 60-square meter (650-square foot) church in disrepair, they would have to reconstruct it with only one floor and have no external crucifix, dome, bell tower, and no door leading to the main street, according to a human rights group. They also stated that if the new church collapsed or burned down, it could not be rebuilt. The Christians in the village said they had obtained the necessary permits for demolishing, rebuilding, and expanding their church to 450 square meters (4,800 square feet) to serve approximately 1,700 Christian residents. According to the human rights group, the Muslim villagers' conditions stemmed from a reconciliation session with certain Christian residents of the village that was not attended by police or clergy. The Christian villagers agreed to most conditions stipulated in the session, and the church was eventually built without an external crucifix or bell tower, but had a door on the main street and was several floors high.

A group of more than 400 Muslim youth attacked a Coptic Orthodox church in the village of Swada in Minya Governorate on December 10, according to a Christian news site. Shortly before the attack, the village mayor asked a leader in the local Christian community to stop construction of the church, for which permits had been obtained in April. During the attack, the youth destroyed contents of the church and injured construction workers. After the mayor dispersed the youth and workers, police closed the church, according to the Christian news site.

There were reports of increasing thefts of Christian-owned lands, especially in Upper Egypt, according to a human rights organization.

Discrimination in private hiring remained widespread, according to sources within human rights groups and religious communities.

Islamist groups continued to use discriminatory or hateful speech against Christians. In an April 26 statement, IS-Sinai explicitly threatened violence against Christians in North Sinai based on the Christians' alleged support of the government and for "not paying *jizya* (the head tax imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule) to the mujahedeen in the state of Sinai." An author said to be affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood who published the online book *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance against the Coup* said some Christians "besieged mosques, killed worshipers, and arrested free women" and stated that such actions should be punished under sharia. The author also stated, "whoever is

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caught ... taking off the *niqab* of a Muslim woman, burning a mosque, or besieging it, is to be killed without *deya* (blood money or religious expiation) or dignity.” Dar Al-Ifta, the nation’s institute for Islamic legal research, condemned the book on August 24, two days after it was published. Additionally, according to the Atlantic Council, Islamist channels propagated hate speech towards Christians, mostly saying the church was waging war against Islam, trying to convert Muslims, or aimed to create a Christian state.

Talk show hosts occasionally approved the killing of Jewish civilians and failed to distinguish between Jews and supporters of Israeli policies in broadcasts critical of such policies. Private Salafist media sometimes included anti-Semitic programming that glorified or denied the Holocaust, including in interviews with academics and clerics. There were reports of imams using anti-Semitic rhetoric in their sermons, including allegations that Jews were responsible for the “spilled blood” of Muslim Palestinians.

In comments to the press in October, local rights organizations noted a spike in hate speech against Shia Muslims since mid-2014. Media outlet Al-Monitor reported in May that the media frequently portrayed Shia Muslims as spies for Iran.

Representatives of some Salafist groups, including the Coalition of Muslims in Defense of the Companions and the Prophet’s Family and the Coalition of Descendants of the Companions and the Prophet’s Family, published disparaging remarks about Shia Muslims. The former coalition’s founder stated a committee from his coalition “monitored” Shia outside the Hussein Mosque on the occasion of Ashura, in order to “prevent” their religious practice within.

In a Facebook post on March 6, President of the Cairo Jewish Community Magda Haroun reported teenagers defiled her family’s graves at the Basateen Jewish cemetery in the south of Cairo on March 5. Haroun said as she was visiting the graves a group of teenagers shouted repeatedly, “the graves of the Jews, the sons of bitches” and then urinated on the graves.

There were public complaints about private restaurants or resorts banning women wearing the Islamic veil from entrance, or from using the beach or pool. In comments to the press in November, a veiled woman who was banned from using an outdoor pool in a swimsuit covering her body and hair in Ain Sokhna, Suez, said that the upscale resort had prevented her from using the pool because it

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wanted to maintain a certain image, and viewed the veil as “not classy.” There were also reports of bars and restaurants denying entry to veiled women and women wearing the *niqab*. In a July interview, then-Minister of Tourism Khaled Abbas Rami denied that the ministry sanctioned these bans, and stated that the ministry would shut down any facility imposing a ban on veiled women.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials at all levels of the U.S. government, including the Secretary of State, Ambassador, and other Department of State and embassy officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the government. These included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable; increased the number of prosecutions of individuals for religious defamation; participated in reconciliation sessions, which were widely believed to be unfair, to address sectarian violence; imposed restrictions on religious discourse in the name of countering violent extremism; and prohibited conversion for Muslim-born citizens.

In President Obama’s remarks at the February Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, he said the slaughter of Egyptian Christians in Libya had shocked the world. During his March visit to Sharm el-Sheikh to attend Egypt’s Economic Development Conference, the Secretary of State noted shock and sadness in light of the “grotesque murder” of the Egyptian Copts in Libya, and stated that Egypt is stronger when all of its citizens have a say and stake in its future. In his August remarks in Cairo during the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue, the Secretary emphasized the importance of religious authorities, educators, and citizens who discredit hateful doctrines and who are ready to build stronger and more resilient communities.

During a November visit to Cairo, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom made public statements supporting religious freedom, noting ongoing U.S. concerns with the Penal Code’s prohibition on denigration of religion, or so-called blasphemy law, and encouraging the government to uphold religious freedom.

The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission regularly raised religious freedom concerns with interlocutors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries. Emphasizing the importance of religious tolerance, they also met with leading religious figures, including the grand imam of Al-Azhar, grand mufti of Dar Al-

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Iftaa, the Coptic Orthodox pope, other leading Christian clergy, representatives of the Jewish community, and representatives of the Shia community.

Other embassy officers met regularly with officials in the Human Rights Unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues. Embassy officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, human rights groups, and other activists. They also discussed religious freedom with a range of individuals, including academics, business leaders, and citizens outside the capital area. Embassy officials actively challenged anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

The embassy supported community development projects designed to encourage religious tolerance. The embassy conducted exchange programs and provided direct grant support for projects to promote tolerance among young religious leaders, interfaith understanding, and civic and political participation by marginalized youth.