



## **Egypt – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 2 December 2011**

### **Information on current religious tensions between Muslims and Christians in Cairo.**

The 2011 *US Commission on International Religious Freedom* report for Egypt, in a section headed “Violence Targeting Christians”, states:

“During the reporting period, there continued to be a high incidence of violent attacks targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians and their property. In most cases, perpetrators have not been convicted. In other cases, the alleged perpetrators have been briefly detained but eventually released without charge. The ongoing violence, and the failure to prosecute those responsible, continued to foster a climate of impunity, especially in Upper Egypt. In recent years, in response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities have conducted "reconciliation" sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compelled victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. This continued during the reporting period. USCIRF has stated that reconciliation efforts should not be used to undermine enforcing the law and punishing perpetrators for wrongdoing. The State Department also has concluded that reconciliation sessions not only ‘prevented the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution’ but also ‘contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults.’” (US Commission on International Religious Freedom (28 April 2011) *USCIRF Annual Report 2011 - Countries of Particular Concern: Egypt*)

A report from *Freedom House* states:

“Violence against Coptic Christians increased dramatically in the final years of Mubarak's rule. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 53 incidents of communal conflict occurred between January 2008 and January 2010. Among others since then, the Nag Hammadi massacre in January 2010, clashes in Marsa Matruh in March 2010, and an Alexandria church bombing in January 2011 have been the most prominent. The Nag Hammadi case serves as an illustrative example. On January 6, 2010, as the Coptic Christmas Eve mass let out, a drive-by shooting left eight Copts and one Muslim guard dead in the Qina Governorate village of Nag Hammadi. Many others were wounded. Riots broke out after the shooting, resulting in additional deaths and the destruction of property. At the time, it was Egypt's most lethal episode of communal violence since 2000. The state reacted with force to contain the strife. It dispatched riot police to keep the Coptic and Muslim populations separate, and blocked access to the village. Security officials claimed that the initial shooting was intended to avenge the rape of a 12-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian the previous November,<sup>50</sup> but no evidence on that alleged incident was provided. Although three people were arrested for the shooting, the trial was delayed 12 times in 2010. Other suspects who were allegedly involved in the killing of Copts or the destruction of property in the unrest that followed the gunfire were not

prosecuted.” (Freedom House (10 November 2011) *Countries at the Crossroads 2011 – Egypt*)

The 2011 *Minority Rights Group International* report for Egypt states:

“Coptic Christians represent between 6 and 9 per cent of Egypt's total population. They are required to list their religion on compulsory national identity cards, a factor which some have noted allows for discrimination to occur against them at the hands of state and private companies, and in access to education and public services. Christians are also under-represented in government at national and local levels. Following the November 2010 elections, Christians held only 2 per cent of seats in the People's Assembly. Christians may freely convert to Islam, but Muslims are prohibited from converting to Christianity or any other religion.” (Minority Rights Group International (6 July 2011) *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 – Egypt*)

This report refers to clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslims as follows:

“In January 2010, the Coptic minority suffered one of the worst atrocities it has experienced in the past decade, Amnesty International reported. On 6 January, Coptic Christmas Eve, six worshippers and an off-duty police officer were killed in a drive-by shooting that took place as people left a church after midnight mass in the city of Nagaa Hammadi. Amnesty said the attack was reportedly a reprisal for the alleged rape of a 12-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian man in November 2009. The allegation had already resulted in the burning and looting of Christian shops in the nearby town of Farshout by hundreds of Muslim protesters. On 7 January, hundreds of Christian protesters clashed with security forces outside a morgue where the bodies of the dead Copts were being held. The protesters chanted anti-government slogans and were met with tear gas. Clashes also occurred in nearby villages, and 28 Copts and 12 Muslims were arrested. Officials quickly reported that eight people were being held in connection with the drive-by shooting. One of the perpetrators was sentenced to death, while, a year later, two others are awaiting the conclusion to their trials. This slow access to justice is not uncommon, experts have noted, and adds to the sense that the state is guilty of a long-standing failure to bring to justice those who attack Christians.” (Minority Rights Group International (6 July 2011) *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 – Egypt*)

The most recent *United States Department of State* report on religious freedom in Egypt, in “Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom”, states:

“Violent sectarian attacks, primarily directed at Copts, continued during the reporting period, although Christians and Muslims share a common culture and live as neighbors throughout the country. Communal tensions and sectarian incitement increased during the reporting period.” (United States Department of State (13 September 2011) *July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report: Egypt*)

An article published by *The Jerusalem Post* states:

“Recent clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt point to grave concerns far beyond the future political direction of the country and its next choice of

leader. Indeed, Egyptians may have collectively celebrated the removal of their octogenarian president in February, but an increase in sectarian violence since Mubarak's fall from grace has led to suggestions that these deep-seated pressures could yet destabilize an ever-evolving Egypt where Coptic Christians account for about 10 percent of the country's 80 million people. On May 8, Muslim-Christian sectarian violence intensified when at least a dozen people were killed and some 200 others were wounded in clashes outside a Cairo church, after rumors surfaced that a Christian woman who had converted to Islam was being held at the church against her will. Just two months earlier, violence erupted when Copts gathered to protest the burning of a church in Helwan, to the south of Cairo, resulting in 13 deaths and 140 injuries. Such tensions are something of a step backwards in this revitalized Egyptian nation where, during nearly three weeks of anti-government rallies in Cairo's Tahrir square, religious figures from both faiths addressed the protesters, and prayers for Muslims and Christians were mutually respected." (The Jerusalem Post (20 June 2011) *Egypt's Sectarian Strife*)

A *CNN.com* report on sectarian violence in Cairo in March 2011 states:

"Thirteen people were killed and 90 wounded in clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Cairo, state-run Egyptian television reported Wednesday. The clashes broke out Tuesday after Copts took to the streets to protest last week's burning of a church. Earlier, Egypt's health minister, Dr. Ashraf Hatem, said the death toll was at nine. Coptic Church spokesman Father Abdelmaseeh Baseet reported six deaths previously Wednesday and said all the victims were Christians." (CNN.com (9 March 2011) *13 killed in sectarian clashes in Egypt*)

A *Christian Science Monitor* report on these clashes states:

"Deadly fighting Tuesday between Christians and Muslims in Cairo killed at least 13 people and wounded 140, deepening sectarian tensions and raising many concerns among Christians about their place in the new Egypt. The violence erupted during a protest in the Manshiyet Nasr slum, a community of mostly poor Christians who work as garbage collectors. About 1,000 Christians were blocking a road to demand that the government rebuild a Christian church outside Cairo that was destroyed last Friday by Muslims. Not long after the demonstration began, Christian eyewitnesses say they were set upon by hundreds of Muslims who used Molotov cocktails, sticks, and knives to attack the rally. But residents of a nearby Muslim neighborhood said the Christians struck first. Ashraf Ramzy, a Christian whose head was bandaged after the fighting, described being terrified because, he says, the Army did not intervene. Mr. Ramzy said the crowd pulled him from his vehicle, beat him, and set his car on fire. "[Muslims] were standing behind the Army, and chanting 'the Army and the people are one,' " a common chant during Egypt's revolution, he said. "Are we not people?" Egypt's revolution was not led by Islamists, and was characterized by a remarkable show of unity and solidarity between Egyptians of different backgrounds. But some Christians, who have long lived with discrimination and injustice, worry that the limited freedoms they have now will be further marginalized by the majority Muslim population." (Christian Science Monitor (9 March 2011) *Egypt's Copts ever more wary after deadly clash with Muslims*)

A report from *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* states:

“Thirteen people were killed and 140 injured on Tuesday in the wake of a church blaze blamed on Muslims. Garbage collectors who are mainly Christian, closed Salah Salem Street and the entrance to Muqattam in protest against Saturday's church attack in the village of Sol. Extremist Islamists, known as Salafiyeen, clashed with the garbage men with molotov cocktails and stones being thrown by both sides before the army intervened. By Wednesday, the road was calm but tensions are frayed. Thousands of Christians, joined by many Muslims, have been staging a sit-in since 5 March protesting against the attack on the St Mina and St George church in the village of Sol. The demonstrators complained about what they said was the inaction of the Egyptian Armed Forces in preventing Muslims from torching the church, most of which was burnt to the ground, and terrorising Christian Copts, forcing them to evacuate the village. The church had been used by Muslims to pray inside to humiliate the Copts, according to the protesters.” (Al-Ahram Weekly Online (16 March 2011) *Ablaze with tension*)

A *Human Rights Watch* report, in a paragraph headed “Background on the Violence”, states:

“On March 4, 2011, in the town of Atfih, 21 kilometers south of Cairo, a mob attacked the Two Martyrs church, burning and badly damaging it, reportedly because of an alleged affair between a Muslim woman and Coptic Christian man. On March 8 Christians in the eastern Cairo suburb of Muqattam protested the Atfih arson and clashed with Muslim counter-demonstrators. Twelve people died in the ensuing violence in which several Christian homes and businesses were torched. The public prosecutor has yet to conclude an investigation into those incidents or refer a case to court. In May, violence outside a Coptic church in Cairo's Imbaba neighborhood left 12 dead.” (Human Rights Watch (10 October 2011) *Egypt: Investigate Violence Against Coptic Christians*)

There were numerous reports of violence between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Cairo in May 2011.

A *Reuters* report on this violence states:

“Egypt stepped up security around churches in Cairo Monday after two days of clashes between minority Christians and Muslims that killed 12 people and highlighted rising inter-faith tensions. The violence that left a church wrecked by fire and more than 238 people wounded at the weekend was triggered by rumors that Christians had abducted a woman who converted to Islam.” (Reuters (9 May 2011) *Egypt tightens security amid inter-faith tensions*)

An *Agence France Presse* report states:

“Clashes between Muslims and Christians in the Egyptian capital Cairo on Saturday left nine dead and more than 100 injured and a church was set on fire, medical and security officials said. The two groups clashed after Muslims attacked the Coptic Saint Mena church in the working class neighbourhood of Imbaba to free a Christian woman they alleged was being held against her will because she wanted to convert to Islam. A parish priest, Father Hermina, told AFP that at least five of the dead were Copts who died when ‘thugs and (Muslim fundamentalist) Salafis fired at them’ in the late afternoon attack. (Agence France Presse (8 May 2011) *Nine killed in sectarian violence in Cairo: officials*)

An *Associated Press* report states:

“Hundreds of Christians and Muslims are hurling stones at each other in downtown Cairo hours after mobs set fire to a church in violence that killed 12 people and injured more than 200. Christian activist Bishoy Tamri says Muslim youths attacked a large crowd of Coptic Christian protesters marching from the headquarters of the general prosecutor to the state television building overlooking the Nile. He says scores have been injured. The Christian protesters are accusing the army of collaborating with crowds of ultraconservative Islamists during the earlier attack on a church overnight. A residential building home to Christians was also burned in the overnight violence.” (Associated Press (8 May 2011) *Hundreds of Christians, Muslims clash in Cairo*)

An article from *The Independent* states:

“At least 12 people were killed and nearly 200 others injured in Cairo as months of tensions between Christians and Muslims in erupted into violence, reigniting fears that Egypt's uprising could degenerate into bloody sectarian strife. The pitched street battles in Imbaba, a poor district of western Cairo, continued into the early hours of yesterday, and two Coptic churches were set ablaze in a night of unrest. The trouble began on Saturday after a rumour spread around the neighbourhood that a woman was being held against her will in the Saint Menas Church because she had married a Muslim man and wanted to convert. The claim was denied by Christians at the church and never substantiated, but by nightfall several hundred members of the Salafi movement - a hardline branch of Islam which has become increasingly vocal since the fall of the former president Hosni Mubarak in February - had gathered in the street outside. After barricading themselves inside the church, the Christians were attacked by Salafists, who hurled petrol bombs at homes and shops and torched the front of the church building.” (The Independent (9 May 2011) *12 people killed as Muslims and Christians clash in Cairo*)

An *Agence France Presse* report states:

“Clashes between Muslims and Christians in the centre of Cairo have left 51 people wounded, the health ministry said Sunday, as Coptic Christians pursued a sit-in protest against the violence. “Most of the wounded suffer from fractures and bruises,” said health ministry official Ayman Ragab, quoted by the MENA news agency. The clashes broke out Saturday after an altercation between a young Muslim and Coptic Christians who have been staging a sit-in outside the state television building in Cairo since May 7, after sectarian unrest last week that left 15 dead, police said. The Muslim returned to the protest site with a group of friends and fired on the Christians with a hunting rifle, the sources said. Clashes then erupted with rocks being thrown and a number of young Muslims arrived later and threw Molotov cocktails at the Christian protesters' vehicles, police said.” (Agence France Presse (15 May 2011) *Over 50 injured in Egypt sectarian unrest: health ministry*)

An *Agence France Presse* report on the deaths of Coptic Christians during a protest in Cairo in October 2011 states:

“A curfew was imposed overnight in Egypt's capital after 24 people, mostly Coptic Christians, died in clashes with security forces in the deadliest violence since president

Hosni Mubarak's fall. More than 200 people were injured in fighting that erupted during a protest by Copts on Sunday, prompting a curfew in central Cairo, said official statements broadcast on public television. At least five of the dead were mown down by a speeding army vehicle, a priest from the minority Coptic community said, while an AFP correspondent saw other bodies with gunshot wounds. Some activists blamed government-backed provocation for the bloodshed which has triggered fears of worsening sectarian strife." (Agence France Presse (10 October 2011) *Egypt forces clash with Copt protesters, 24 dead*)

A *Daily Telegraph* report on this incident states:

"At least 20 Egyptian Christians were killed last night amid the country's worst religious violence since February's overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. Coptic protesters clashed with the Egyptian army and gangs of unknown origin in Cairo's Tahrir Square, where people power triumphed over state oppression eight months ago. It remains unclear who instigated the confrontation, but the Copts, who have been staging regular demonstrations to protest against the growing number of attacks on their churches, became enraged after being pelted by missiles. Three soldiers were reported to have been killed after they were overcome by Christian rioters, but witnesses said the army had opened fire with live ammunition and one soldier had driven an armoured personnel carrier into a group of peaceful protesters, running over at least five of them. The bloody scenes prompted fears that Egypt is drawing ever closer to a sustained religious conflict. There were reports of violence in several Egyptian towns and cities with large Christian populations in the aftermath of the pandemonium in Cairo." (Daily Telegraph (10 October 2011) *Christians shot dead in Cairo clashes*)

A report from *The Economist Online* states:

"The previously announced march on October 9th was to protest the government's failure to stem rising sectarian tensions following a spate of hate attacks on Coptic churches. These began well before the revolution, but have continued with seeming impunity, culminating in September with the destruction by Muslim villagers of a church in the southern province of Aswan. Not only Copts, but secular parties and even the Muslim Brotherhood have condemned the government's hesitancy to address the problem by anything more than calls for unity. While many Muslims are ignorant of, or disparage Christian concerns, anger and despair has grown among Copts, whose community long predates the arrival of Islam in Egypt. The estimated 10,000 protesters on October 9th included secular activists as well as Coptic Christians. By all accounts they behaved peacefully until blocked by military police protecting the television building. Some reports suggest that unknown infiltrators then instigated a clash. Whatever the case, security forces responded brutally, first with baton charges bolstered by gunfire, then by careening through crowded streets in armoured personnel carriers. Unhelpfully, state television repeatedly broadcast news that armed Copts had shot and killed several soldiers, fanning a wave of calls for Muslim citizens to 'protect' the army from this menace. State organs also incited Muslim anger by reporting, falsely, that America's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had offered to send troops to protect Coptic churches. Hard-line Islamist groups quickly picked up on the baseless news, declaring that this was evidence of a foreign conspiracy to undermine Egypt. In the ensuing running battles, some local youths joined with soldiers in attacking suspected Copts and sympathizers, chasing away rival groups who chanted in solidarity with their Christian

brothers.” (The Economist Online (10 October 2011) *A bloody Sunday in Cairo: Violence in Egypt*)

An *International Business Times News* report states:

“Egyptian state media coverage of Sunday's violent clashes in Cairo between thousands of Christian Coptic demonstrators and Muslim supporters and security forces has come under fire after witnesses and journalists insisted it provided a distorted account. The demonstrators had started a peaceful protest in the Maspero district, off Tahrir Square, over recent church burnings and demanded equal rights for the country's 8 million Christians, but were soon surrounded by military and police forces in tanks and armed with tear gas and live ammunition. While state media asserted that much of the violence came from the demonstrators' side, eyewitnesses revealed a different account, asserting that 21 protesters, most of them Copts, were killed as tanks ran over several young people and police shot rubber and live bullets. The army said three soldiers were also killed and the Egyptian Ministry of Health has confirmed that at least 329 people were wounded by the end of the evening. A number of critics accused state television of not only failing to calm matters, but aggravating an already tense situation.” (International Business Times News (11 October 2011) *Egyptians Scorn Official Media Accounts of Cairo Bloodshed*)

A *New York Times* article states:

“When liberal Muslims joined Coptic Christians as they marched through Cairo's Maspero area on Oct. 9 to protest the burning of a Coptic church, bands of conservative Muslim hooligans wielding sticks and swords began attacking the protesters. Egyptian security forces who had apparently intervened to break up the violence deliberately rammed their armed vehicles into the Coptic crowd and fired live ammunition indiscriminately. Egyptian military authorities soon shut down live news coverage of the event, and evidence of chaos was quickly cleared from the scene. But the massacre, in which at least 24 people were killed and more than 300 were wounded, was the worst instance of sectarian violence in Egypt in 60 years.” (New York Times (19 November 2011) *After Egypt's Revolution, Christians Are Living in Fear ...*)

A report published by the *US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe* summarises some major incidents involving Coptic Christians during 2011 as follows

“These two incidents, and others like them, took place before the fall of President Mubarak on February 11. We have since received reports of an increase in sectarian violence and tensions, including at least 67 people killed in religious clashes – most of them Coptic Christians. This brings the total number of reported deaths this year to more than 90. There have been at least six recent major incidents of violence against Copts:

- o On February 23, the Army used live ammunition, including rocket propelled grenades, against unarmed Copts during a land dispute at a monastery. A monk, one of the six shot, later died. To our knowledge, no one has been held accountable for these attacks.
- o On March 4, in the village of Sol, a large group of Muslim villagers destroyed the Church of Saint Mina and St. George after the army failed to stop them. To our

knowledge, there has been no investigation and no one has been charged despite videos of the perpetrators.

o On March 8, 13 people were killed when Muslims and Copts clashed in the Mukkatum area of Cairo. Some of the Copts had been protesting the slow government response to the destruction of the church in Sol. One Coptic bishop claimed that though news reports listed seven Christians and six Muslims. To our knowledge, there has been no investigation and no one has been charged in the deaths.” (US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission) (15 November 2011) *From Arab Spring to Coptic Winter: Sectarian Violence and the Struggle for Democratic Transition in Egypt*)

This report continues:

“o On May 8 in Imbaba, a poor neighborhood of Cairo, two churches were attacked and one burned during sectarian riots. The clashes resulted in 23 deaths and 232 injuries. That month, the official media reported that the government referred 48 suspects to trial. Approximately half of these suspects have been arrested, including a prominent Salafist leader, while half remain at large. The High State Security Court in Giza has adjourned the trial until December 4, when it expects to hear testimony from the remaining witnesses.

o On September 30, in Merinab village in Edfu, Aswan governorate, an estimated crowd of 3,000 Muslims looted and burned the St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, in addition to some Copt-owned homes and businesses, following reported incitement by village imams. Local media reported that a Ministry of Justice fact-finding committee traveled to Aswan on October 12, in the aftermath of the Maspiro violence, to investigate the church burning. The status of this investigation is unclear.

o And finally, on October 9 in Cairo, violence erupted in front of the Egyptian television building known as Maspiro, at a demonstration by Copts protesting the government’s failure to investigate the burning of the church in Merinab in Aswan governorate. At least twenty-five people were killed and more than 300 injured.” (ibid)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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