



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Egypt

Egypt – EGY38823 – Coptic Christians – Current Situation – State Protection

30 June 2011

1. What is the current situation in relation to Coptic Christians in Egypt?

Sources indicate an increase in sectarian violence and attacks since President Hosni Mubarak's resignation in February, resulting in deaths and injuries. The International Federation for Human Rights, the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights report that police and military forces have failed to adequately protect Christians and their property in the post-Mubarak period.¹ In May 2011, the US Commission for International Religious Freedom recommended that, for the first time, Egypt be designated a country of particular concern.²

Sources indicate that the security situation has greatly deteriorated as a result of a power vacuum left after the transitional government dismantled the police and intelligence services. This has reportedly emboldened extremist groups and diminished the capacity of the authorities to respond to attacks.

The bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria on the 1st January 2011 was the worst sectarian attack on Christians in Egypt in over a decade, killing 23 people and wounding nearly 100.³ Conditions have not improved since President Mubarak's resignation on 11 February 2011, with sources reporting an overall increase in sectarian conflict and attacks.⁴ Incidences of sectarian violence include:

¹ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) 2011, *Escalation of inter-confessional violence in Egypt*, 9 May – Attachment 10.; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p49 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 5.; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 9.

² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p49 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.

³ Minority Rights Group International 2011, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Egypt: Copts*, April – Attachment 1. ; Johnston, G. P. 2011, 'Who will defend Christians in Egypt?' *The Whig Standard*, 27 March <http://www.thewhig.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3043828> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 2.

⁴ Kirkpatrick, David P. 2011, 'Egypt's Christians fear violence as changes embolden Islamists', *The New York Times*, 30 May

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/world/middleeast/31coptic.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=th22&page_wanted=print – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 3.; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p49 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.

- 5 March 2011 – a Coptic church was torched in the village of Sol in Helwan, 30km south of Cairo.⁵ This occurred during sectarian clashes that had reportedly erupted as a result of a romantic relationship between a Coptic man and a Muslim woman.⁶
- 8 March 2011 – 13 people were killed and 150 wounded in clashes between Muslims and Christians during a Christian protest following the attack on the church in Sol.⁷ The demonstrators called for the church to be rebuilt, perpetrators to be punished, and better treatment by Egyptian authorities. Some Coptic groups claimed that all the victims were Christians, while other reports indicate that as many as five of the deceased were Muslims.⁸
- 20 March 2011 – in the Upper Egypt town of Qena a group of extremists cut off the ear of a Coptic Christian man, claiming they were implementing sharia law as punishment. The Christian man did not pursue criminal charges because extremists allegedly threatened his family.⁹
- 7-8 May 2011 – 15 people were killed, 242 injured and two churches attacked in violent clashes between Christians and Muslims in the suburb of Imbaba, north-west Cairo.¹⁰ The violence was reportedly sparked by rumours that Christians were holding a girl against her will and trying to dissuade her from leaving her Christian husband for a Muslim man.¹¹ On 30 May 2011 *The New York Times* reported that such rumours ‘ignite most outbreaks of Muslim-Christian violence’ in Egypt.¹²
- 8-21 May 2011 – Following the Imbaba violence, Copts staged a sit-in outside the state television building, known as Maspero, to protest the failure of Egyptian police and armed forces to protect their churches. On the 14 May, sources indicate that a group of Muslims

⁵ Shea, N. 2011, ‘Egypt’s Copts suffer more attacks’, *The National Review Online*, 5 March <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/261405/egypt-s-copts-suffer-more-attacks-nina-shea> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 6.

⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.; ‘Copts confront new reality’, 2011, *America*, 28 March – Attachment 7.

⁷ Guirguis, Helmy 2011, ‘Egypt’s Christians fear post-Mubarak era’, *IWPR Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 16 June <http://iwpr.net/print/report-news/egypts-christians-fear-post-mubarak-era> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 5.; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.

⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.

⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4.; Guirguis, Helmy 2011, ‘Egypt’s Christians fear post-Mubarak era’, *IWPR Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 16 June <http://iwpr.net/print/report-news/egypts-christians-fear-post-mubarak-era> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 5.

¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, David D. 2011, ‘Muslims and Coptic Christians clash again in Egypt’, *The New York Times*, 15 May <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/world/middleeast/16egypt.html> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 8.; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 9.; International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) 2011, *Escalation of inter-confessional violence in Egypt*, 9 May – Attachment 10.

¹¹ ‘Two convicted for attacking Coptic sit-in in Egypt, while 16 walk’ 2011, *Ahram Online*, 5 June – eAttachment 11.

¹² Kirkpatrick, David P. 2011, ‘Egypt’s Christians fear violence as changes embolden Islamists’, *The New York Times*, 30 May http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/world/middleeast/31coptic.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=th22&page_wanted=print – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 3.

fired shots at the sit-in, which resulted in a clash between Christians and Muslims, involving rocks, knives and Molotov cocktails.¹³ At least 55 people were reportedly hospitalised.¹⁴

Sources have described the Imbaba attackers as Salafis – fundamentalist Muslims seeking to implement sharia law.¹⁵ Sources claim extremist groups have become emboldened with the fall of the Mubarak regime and consequent weakening of internal security.¹⁶ Additionally, *The Guardian* reports that it is ‘widely believed’ that elements of the Mubarak regime are encouraging these groups.¹⁷ The recent sectarian violence has been condemned by the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s main Islamist grouping.¹⁸

2. Do the authorities offer adequate protection?

The transitional authorities have indicated a willingness to protect Coptic Christians by issuing statements condemning the violence, establishing a government committee to focus on the issue of sectarian violence and moving to amend legislation that discriminates against Copts. The political situation, however, remains highly fluid and little information was found to suggest there have been concrete improvements in regards to state protection for Coptic Christians.

Compounding the political uncertainty, sources indicate that the security situation has greatly deteriorated as a result of a power vacuum left after the transitional government dismantled the police and intelligence services.¹⁹ Speaking at a press conference in Cairo in March 2011, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon said he had been told that Egypt’s security apparatus was ‘possibly 60% of what it was a month ago’.²⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the government has failed to establish law and order by rebuilding security forces.²¹ Additionally, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) states that since Mubarak’s

¹³ ‘Two convicted for attacking Coptic sit-in in Egypt, while 16 walk’ 2011, *Ahram Online*, 5 June – Attachment 11.; Kirkpatrick, David D. 2011, ‘Muslims and Coptic Christians clash again in Egypt’, *The New York Times*, 15 May <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/world/middleeast/16egypt.html> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 8.

¹⁴ Kirkpatrick, David D. 2011, ‘Muslims and Coptic Christians clash again in Egypt’, *The New York Times*, 15 May <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/world/middleeast/16egypt.html> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 8.

¹⁵ Black, Ian 2011, ‘Egypt promises justice after Copts and Muslims clash in Cairo’, *The Guardian*, 8 May <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/08/egypt-copts-muslims-clash-cairo> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 12.; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 9.

¹⁶ Fleishman, Jeffrey 2011, ‘Sectarian clashes kill 12 in Cairo; More than 200 are injured and nearly as many arrested after Muslims attack Copts and burn a church’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May – Attachment 22.

¹⁷ Black, Ian 2011, ‘Egypt promises justice after Copts and Muslims clash in Cairo’, *The Guardian*, 8 May <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/08/egypt-copts-muslims-clash-cairo> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 12.

¹⁸ Black, Ian 2011, ‘Egypt promises justice after Copts and Muslims clash in Cairo’, *The Guardian*, 8 May <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/08/egypt-copts-muslims-clash-cairo> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 12.

¹⁹ Knell, Yolande 2011, ‘New sectarian clashes raise fears of chaos in Egypt’, *BBC News*, 11 March <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12674675> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 13.; Kirkpatrick, David D. 2011, ‘Muslims and Coptic Christians clash again in Egypt’, *The New York Times*, 15 May <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/world/middleeast/16egypt.html> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 8.; Johnston, G. P. 2011, ‘Who will defend Christians in Egypt?’ *The Whig Standard*, 27 March <http://www.thewhig.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3043828> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 2.

²⁰ Johnston, G. P. 2011, ‘Who will defend Christians in Egypt?’ *The Whig Standard*, 27 March <http://www.thewhig.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3043828> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 2

²¹ Fleishman, Jeffrey 2011, ‘Sectarian clashes kill 12 in Cairo; More than 200 are injured and nearly as many arrested after Muslims attack Copts and burn a church’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May – Attachment 22.

resignation, the lack of adequate security in the streets has contributed to lawlessness in parts of the country, particularly Upper Egypt.²²

Sources indicate that security forces have failed to respond adequately to some of the attacks listed in question one. *The National Review Online* claims that during the arson attack in Sol, ‘the fire department and security forces failed to respond to Coptic pleas for help...’²³ During the subsequent Cairo demonstrations over the attack in Sol, the USCIRF cites reports which claim that the Egyptian military ‘stood by for as long as four hours without intervening in the clashes’.²⁴

The transitional authorities have also been criticised for failing to protect Christians during the violence in Imbaba. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) conducted an investigation into the attacks, concluding that there was a ‘clear dereliction of duty on the part of the security apparatus’.²⁵ The EIPR investigation found:

The authorities’ response to the attacks reveals a continued failure of the security apparatus to deal with sectarian crises. The police knew in advance that groups of Salafis had assembled in front of the Mar Mina Church in Imbaba, but they failed to anticipate the events – despite evidence suggesting the potential for violence two or more hours before clashes erupted – and in turn failed to prevent the violence.²⁶

The EIPR gathered testimonies claiming that no army forces were present to secure the Virgin Mary Church after the police charged with guarding the facility fled upon the assailants’ arrival. The EIPR states that, despite there being several indications that groups of Muslims would attempt to attack other churches in the area, and despite the heavy presence of army and police forces on the main street, neither body deployed their forces around the other churches, which facilitated the burning of the Virgin Mary Church.²⁷

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) corroborated some of these findings, stating that the army ‘was deployed on the scene but did not intervene in the clashes’ in Imbaba. This ‘calls into question the ability of the army and the police to ensure the protection of the population’, according to FIDH’s member organisation in Egypt.²⁸

Some sources also claim that the Egyptian military has used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship. Christian news agencies *Compass Direct* and the *Assyrian International News Agency* reported that Copts were injured in late February 2011 when the Egyptian Army destroyed a security wall at a Christian monastery in Wadi Al-Natroun, 110

²² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53
<http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

²³ Shea, N. 2011, ‘Egypt’s Copts suffer more attacks’, *The National Review Online*, 5 March
<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/261405/egypt-s-copts-suffer-more-attacks-nina-shea> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 6.

²⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53
<http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

²⁵ Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 9.

²⁶ Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 9.

²⁷ Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2011, *EIPR Releases Findings of Field Investigation into Imbaba Events*, 14 May <http://www.eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2011/05/14/1166> – Accessed 28 June 2011 – Attachment 9.

²⁸ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) 2011, *Escalation of inter-confessional violence in Egypt*, 9 May – Attachment 10.

kilometres north of Cairo.²⁹ The USCIRF states that, according to church authorities, the monastery had come under increasing attack from ‘raiders and criminals’ as security diminished following the January revolution.³⁰ The military had reportedly denied a request for protection from the monks, who subsequently built the wall to control access.³¹ The military claimed the monastery had not acquired the proper permit to construct the wall.³² The government restriction on church construction and repairs, which does not apply to mosques, is often cited as evidence of the discrimination suffered by Copts.³³

The transitional authorities have made some statements which indicate a willingness to protect Coptic Christians. Following the violence in Imbaba, the Justice Minister, Abdel Aziz al-Gindi, declared that the government would “immediately and firmly implement the laws that criminalise attacks against places of worship and freedom of belief”.³⁴ The *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)* reported that the authorities threatened severe penalties, including capital punishment, for those attacking places of worship.³⁵ On 4 June 2011, the public prosecutor referred 48 suspects to an Emergency High State Security Court over their role in the Imbaba clashes.³⁶ Conversely, however, Egyptian media reports that a Cairo court found 16 suspects not guilty for their alleged role in the attack on the Coptic sit-in protest in May, and that another two men were each sentenced to two years jail only to be granted bail and released.³⁷ These reports could not be corroborated elsewhere.

Prime Minister Sharaf has also established a National Justice Committee within the cabinet tasked with addressing sectarian issues and drafting a new unified law for building houses of worship.³⁸ The new draft law has been labelled by one Coptic Bishop as a “major step forward for the citizenship of Christians”.³⁹ However, other church officials in Egypt have criticised the draft law

²⁹ ‘Monk, Workers Shot in Monastery Attack in Egypt’ 2011, *Compass Direct*, 28 February <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/egypt/33630/?view=Print> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 14; Shea, N. 2011, ‘Egypt’s Copts suffer more attacks’, *The National Review Online*, 5 March <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/261405/egypt-s-copts-suffer-more-attacks-nina-shea> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 6.; *IWPR Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 16 June <http://iwpr.net/print/report-news/egypts-christians-fear-post-mubarak-era> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 5.; Abdelmassih, M. 2011, ‘Egyptian Armed Forces Fire at Christian Monasteries, 19 Injured’, *Assyrian International News Agency*, 24 February <http://www.aina.org/news/20110223210634.htm> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 17.

³⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

³¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

³² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

³³ Knell, Yolande 2011, ‘New sectarian clashes raise fears of chaos in Egypt’, *BBC News*, 11 March <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12674675> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 13.; ‘No more discriminatory laws against churches in Egypt: PM Sharaf’ 2011, *Ahram Online*, 11 May Attachment 15.

³⁴ Barker, Anne 2011, ‘Egypt threatens ‘iron hand’ over sectarian clashes’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, 9 May Attachment 16.

³⁵ Barker, Anne 2011, ‘Egypt threatens ‘iron hand’ over sectarian clashes’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, 9 May Attachment 16.

³⁶ It should also be noted, however, that in June 2011 Human Rights Watch criticised these security courts for not meeting international fair trial standards, not providing a right of appeal and being notorious for relying on confessions obtained under torture. Human Rights Watch 2011, *Egypt: Human Rights Reform an Urgent Priority*, 7 June <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/06/07/egypt-human-rights-reform-urgent-priority> – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 17.

³⁷ ‘Two convicted for attacking Coptic sit-in in Egypt, while 16 walk’ 2011, *Ahram Online*, 5 June Attachment 11.

³⁸ Kamel, Mansour and Emad Khalil 2011, ‘Prime Minister announces committee to tackle sectarian issues’, *Almasry Alyoum*, 11 May Attachment 18.

³⁹ ‘Optimism in Egypt over building churches’ 2011, *Aid to the Church in Need*, 22 June http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6631&news_iv_ctrl=1001 – Accessed 28 June 2011 Attachment 19.

in a number of areas, including its requirement that any new construction be at least one kilometre from other religious buildings.⁴⁰ This proposal is yet to come into law.

Although the transitional government has made the above statements and proposed legislative reforms, sources continue to report concerns over the level of sectarian violence and the response of the security forces. In May 2011 the US Commission for International Religious Freedom recommended that, for the first time, Egypt be designated a country of particular concern. This was due to ‘the Egyptian government’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations’.⁴¹ The 2011 USCIRF report concludes that ‘the Egyptian authorities have failed to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, from violent attacks, including during the transitional period when minority communities are increasingly vulnerable’. Since Mubarak’s resignation, religious freedom conditions have not improved and attacks targeting Coptic Christians have risen, the Commission concluded.⁴²

3. Please provide any further information you feel may be helpful.

Since President Mubarak stood down on 11 February 2011 Egypt has been ruled by a military council, after the military dissolved parliament and suspended the constitution. On 19 March a referendum was passed paving the way for constitutional reforms and presidential and parliamentary elections within six months.⁴³ A clearer picture of what the recent political upheaval will mean for Christians may emerge once the political process has been settled and normal government functions fully restored. The interim military council has promised a transfer of power to a permanent civilian government in late 2011.

⁴⁰ ‘Egypt’s obscure laws on religious buildings. Doubts of the Christian communities’ 2011, *Asia News*, 21 June <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Egypt%E2%80%99s-obscure-law-on-religious-buildings.-Doubts-of-the-Christian-communities-21899.html> – Accessed 29 June 2011 Attachment 20.; Hassan, Amro 2011, “EGYPT: Draft laws for mosques and churches face criticism”, *Los Angeles Times* 22 June <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/06/egypt-drafts-for-new-laws-face-criticism.html> – Accessed 29 June 2011 - Attachment 21

⁴¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

⁴² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2011, *Annual Report 2011*, May, p53 <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf> – Accessed 27 June 2011 – Attachment 4

⁴³ MacFarquhar, N. 2011 ‘Egyptian Voters Approve Constitutional Changes’, *The New York Times*, 20 March, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/world/middleeast/21egypt.html> – Accessed 29 June 2011 Attachment 23.

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