



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Egypt: Christians

Version 2.0

November 2016

Preface

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and policy guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the policy guidance contained with this note; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Country information

The COI within this note has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), dated July 2012.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office’s COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. IAGCI may be contacted at:

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration,
5th Floor, Globe House, 89 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1PN.

Email: chiefinspector@icinspector.gsi.gov.uk

Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

Contents

Policy guidance	5
1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Basis of claim.....	5
1.2 Points to note.....	5
2. Consideration of issues.....	5
2.1 Credibility.....	5
2.2 Assessment of risk.....	5
2.3 Protection.....	7
2.4 Internal relocation.....	8
2.5 Certification.....	8
3. Policy summary.....	9
Country Information	10
4. Christians: background.....	10
4.1 Terminology.....	10
4.2 Day-to-day life.....	10
4.3 Demography.....	11
5. Legal rights.....	12
5.1 Constitution.....	12
5.2 Blasphemy laws.....	14
5.3 Conversion and proselytising laws.....	15
5.4 Anti-discrimination laws.....	16
5.5 Personal status laws.....	17
5.6 Construction and renovation of churches laws.....	18
6. State attitude and treatment.....	19
6.1 Political situation.....	19
6.2 Prosecution for blasphemy and defamation.....	20
6.3 Converts to Christianity.....	23
6.4 Building and renovation of churches.....	25
6.5 State protection.....	29
6.6 Reconciliation Committees.....	35
6.7 Judiciary.....	36
7. Societal attitudes and treatment.....	36
7.1 Discrimination and violence tensions.....	36
7.2 Interfaith relationships.....	42
7.3 Women.....	43

7.4 Christian Converts.....	44
8. Freedom of movement.....	45
Version control and contacts.....	46

Policy guidance

Updated: 21 November 2016

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm at the hands of the state and / or non-state actors because the person is a Christian.

1.2 Points to note

1.2.1 Generally, the term 'Coptic' is used to describe all Egyptian Christians. This includes members of the Coptic Orthodox Church but extends to, amongst other denominations, evangelicals and Catholics.

[Back to Contents](#)

2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).

2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.2 Assessment of risk

2.2.1 Christians are an established and significant minority in Egypt, with an estimated population of between 8 to 15 percent of the overall population. They are spread throughout the country but concentrated in Upper Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria (see [Demography](#)).

2.2.2 Christians generally are able to live and work alongside Egyptians of other faiths, although some reportedly face societal discrimination and violence, including looting, bomb and arson attacks, blocking of church construction, kidnapping and mob violence. Discrimination and violence tends to be worse in certain parts of the country, particularly in rural areas, and poorer urban or religiously conservative areas. Incidences of violence are mainly confined to North Sinai, where the activity of extremist elements is more prevalent (see [Societal attitudes and treatment](#), specifically [Discrimination and violence tensions](#)).

2.2.3 In the country guidance case of [MS \(Coptic Christians: Egypt CG \[2013\] UKUT 611 \(IAC\) \(3 December 2013\)](#), the Upper Tribunal found that Coptic Christians in Egypt were not at a general risk of persecution or serious harm, though each case would need to be considered on its merits (para 151(1) and 151 (7)).

2.2.4 The UT further found that:

‘... on current evidence there are some areas where Coptic Christians will face a real risk of persecution or ill-treatment contrary to Article 3. In general these will be (a) areas outside the large cities; (b) where radical Islamists have a strong foothold; and (c) where there have been recent attacks on Coptic Christians or their churches, businesses or properties (Para 151(2)).

‘On the evidence before the Upper Tribunal, the following are particular risk categories in the sense that those falling within them will generally be able to show a real risk of persecution or treatment contrary to Article 3, at least in their home area:

- (i) converts to Coptic Christianity;
- (ii) persons who are involved in construction or reconstruction/repair of churches that have been the target for an attack or attacks;
- (iii) those accused of proselytising where the accusation is serious and not casual;
- (iv) those accused of being physically or emotionally involved with a Muslim woman where the accusation is made seriously and not casually (Para 151(3)).

‘Coptic Christian women in Egypt are not in general at real risk of persecution or ill-treatment, although they face difficulties additional to other women, in the form of sometimes being the target of disappearances, forced abduction and forced conversion (Para 151(4)).

‘However, depending on the particular circumstances of the case, Coptic Christian women aged between 14-25 years who lack a male protector may be at such risk (Para 151(5)).

‘If a claimant is able to establish that in their home area they fall within one or more of the risk categories identified in 3 (i)-(iv) above or that they come from an area where the local Coptic population faces a real risk of persecution, it will not necessarily follow that they qualify as refugees or as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection or Article 3 ECHR protection. That will depend on whether they can show they would not have a viable internal relocation alternative. In such cases there will be need for a fact-specific assessment but, in general terms, resettlement in an area where Islamists are not strong would appear to be a viable option.’ (Para 151(6)).

2.2.5 Since [MS](#), which relied on evidence up to the end of 2013, the political, security and social situation for Christians has improved. Generally, the Al Sisi Government has sought to improve law and order and has taken several highly visible steps towards bettering state relations with the Coptic community.

2.2.6 However, the improved religious freedom provisions in the Constitution have not yet been implemented, new provisions related to the building and renovating of churches are discriminatory with Copts being more likely to face prosecution and conviction for blasphemy/defamation than Muslims, which have increased under Al Sisi.

- 2.2.7 While Christians continue to face societal discrimination and some violence, the number and severity of violent incidents targeting Copts and their property has decreased, although the government in some cases failed to adequately protect religious minorities (see [State attitude and treatment](#) and [Societal attitudes and treatment](#)).
- 2.2.8 Christians are not generally at risk of persecution or serious harm by the state. Nor are they generally at risk of persecution or serious harm by non-state actors in urban areas, including in Cairo and Alexandria.
- 2.2.9 However, while levels of societal violence have generally declined since 2013, Christians in some rural or poorer areas with a strong extremist presence and where there have been recent attacks on churches and Christian properties continue to face discrimination and ill-treatment by non-state actors that may amount to persecution.
- 2.2.10 While in general Christians are unlikely to be at risk, each case will need to be considered on its merits with the onus on the person to demonstrate why they would be at risk of persecution or serious harm.
- 2.2.11 For guidance on assessing risk see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#)

[Back to Contents](#)

2.3 Protection

- 2.3.1 Where the person's fear is of persecution or serious harm at the hands of the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.3.2 Where the person's fear is of non-state actors (including rogue state elements), decision makers will need to consider the case on its facts. In MS the Upper Tribunal found that there was inadequate state protection for Coptic Christians from other Egyptians (paragraph 151(1)). Since MS was promulgated, there is evidence to indicate that the state has shown a greater willingness and ability to protect Christians who have been targeted for violence.
- 2.3.3 However, the lack of success in preventing, investigating or prosecuting those responsible for violence against Copts continues to foster an atmosphere of impunity. Authorities typically use Reconciliation Committees to tackle sectarian incidents, which are seen as a temporary solution which typically favour the Muslim community. Decision makers must therefore consider the circumstances of each case on its facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate that protection is not available (see [State protection](#)).
- 2.3.4 See also the country policy information and note on [Egypt: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).
- 2.3.5 For further guidance assessing the availability or not of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.4 Internal relocation

- 2.4.1 There is no legal impediment to internal movement within Egypt, including for single women, and Copts do relocate for a variety of security, economic and social reasons. Some Egyptian Copts have internally relocated because of sectarian tension either voluntarily or as a result of Reconciliation Committees. If means allow, families will usually help with finding shelter and financial assistance. The church can also sometimes assist. It has been reported that rural and poor Coptic women will find it more difficult to find shelter and employment. Women, and especially single women, with no support network, may be particularly vulnerable and face destitution (see [Freedom of Movement](#)).
- 2.4.2 The UT in [MS](#) found that, in general, where the person's fear is from a non-state actor they will be able to relocate, particularly to an area where religious extremists do not have a strong presence such as Cairo or Alexandria. However each case will need to be considered on its individual facts taking into account the particular circumstances of the person, the nature of the threat and how far it would extend, and whether or not it would be unduly harsh to expect the person to relocate (paragraph 139).
- 2.4.3 See also the country policy information and note on [Egypt: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).
- 2.4.4 For further guidance on internal relocation and the factors to be taken into account, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.5 Certification

- 2.5.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on certification, see the [Appeals Instruction on Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#)

[Back to Contents](#)

3. Policy summary

- 3.1.1 While some Christians in Egypt may face discrimination, they are not in general at risk of persecution or serious harm by the state.
- 3.1.2 Christians face societal discrimination and sectarian violence but they are not in general at risk of persecution or serious harm by non-state actors. However, in some areas outside the main cities where religious extremists have a stronger foothold, and where there have been attacks on Christians, against their property, businesses and churches, they may be at risk of persecution or serious harm at the hands of non state actors. In addition there may be particular factors in an individual case which do put a person at risk.
- 3.1.3 While existing caselaw has found that there is no effective state protection of Christians, the situation in Egypt has since improved and there is evidence of the state being both willing and in some cases able to provide protection. Therefore, each case will need to be considered on its merits.
- 3.1.4 In general a Christian will be able to internally relocate, especially to an area where extremists do not have a strong presence. Each case will need to be considered on its specific facts and the person's individual circumstances. Internal relocation is generally possible, depending on the particular individual circumstances of the person.

[Back to Contents](#)

Country Information

Updated: 16 November 2016

4. Christians: background

4.1 Terminology

- 4.1.1 The Coptic Network 'Encyclopedia Coptica' states that the modern use of the term 'Coptic' describes Egyptian Christians.¹ Christianity Today noted that it is generally understood that as 'the Christians of Egypt', Copts comprise Orthodox, Evangelicals and Catholics. In the same article, Mark Nygard, Director of Graduate Studies at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, explained that "Copts are the historical Orthodox Church of Egypt. It is a fuzzy term, but strictly speaking it refers to those under the [Orthodox] pope's authority". Dr Atef Gendy, President of the seminary added, "the accurate definition of Coptic is the ethnic identity of Christians of Egypt, but the common understanding is of the Orthodox, due to their status as the oldest church." The article noted that around 90 percent of Christians in Egypt belong to the Orthodox Church.²

[Back to Contents](#)

4.2 Day-to-day life

- 4.2.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts, November 2015, based on a range of sources, observed that:

'The Coptic community is politically and socio-economically diverse: Copts do not necessarily agree on political representatives or policies. They hold varied professions; are represented across the socio-economic spectrum from the very poor to the substantially rich; and have attained a range of education levels. As such, it is difficult to generalise about the day-to-day lives of Copts relative to other Egyptians.'

'...Generally speaking, Copts dress in the same modest fashion as other Egyptians. In urban areas, however, most Coptic women leave their hair uncovered, whereas Muslim women generally cover their hair. Coptic women living in rural or conservative areas are more likely to cover their hair, but do not wear the Islamic hijab. Depending on their location and socio-economic status, Coptic men sometimes wear the traditional Egyptian tunic—known as the gellabiya—or Western-style clothing like other Egyptians. Copts tend to have identifiable names.'

'... Like all Egyptians, Copts carry a government-issued national identity card. The identity card contains a field for the bearer's religion—in the case

¹ The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, The Coptic Network Encyclopedia, last updated January 2006, <http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/> Date accessed: 5 Sep 2016

² Christianity Today, Who are the Copts? 15 June 2012 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/juneweb-only/who-are-copts.html> Date accessed: 5 Sep 2016

of Copts, 'Christianity' is marked, as it is for members of other Christian groups. Copts are not required to carry any other form of identity.'³

4.2.2 The Wall Street Journal in their Report, Five Things to Know About Egypt's Coptic Christians, stated that:

'After Islam swept through the region, Copts had to pay taxes designated for non-Muslims. These levies were withdrawn in the 19th century, however, as part of Ottoman reforms aimed at modernizing government and centralizing power in Istanbul. This led to an economic resurgence that lasted roughly until the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy and the advent of the modern Egyptian state in the early 1950s. Since then, Copts have sporadically complained of marginalization and harassment, especially at the hands of Islamists. Copts were largely supportive of long-time Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who they perceived as a protector because of his crackdown.'⁴

[Back to Contents](#)

4.3 Demography

4.3.1 According to the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report (USCIRF) 2016 published in April 2016: 'Christians are estimated at 10 to 15 percent of the overall population [of Egypt], with the vast majority belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church and less than two percent belonging to various other Christian denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) and Anglican.'⁵

4.3.2 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts stated that:

'Egypt's current estimated population is 88.95 million, with an annual growth rate of 1.79 percent (as of July 2015). While Egypt's most recent census did not release data on religion, it is generally accepted that Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 90 percent of the population and that Coptic Christians make up between 8-10 percent (approximately 7-9 million), with the remainder consisting of negligible populations of other religious groups, including Shi'a Muslims, non-Coptic Christians, Baha'is and Jews. Coptic Christians in Egypt are the Middle East's largest Christian minority.'

4.3.3 The report continued that:

'While Copts reside throughout the country, they are particularly concentrated in Upper Egypt (the southern part of Egypt) and in major cities

³ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 2: Background Information, Paragraphs 2.13 to 2.17, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

⁴ The Wall Street Journal, Five Things to Know About Egypt's Coptic Christians, 16 February 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2015/02/16/5-five-things-to-know-about-egypts-coptic-christians/> Date accessed: 10 Oct 2016

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Background, April 2016, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf Date accessed: 5 Sep 2016

such as Cairo and Alexandria. There are suburbs in Cairo, other cities and some villages that are known to be 'Coptic' areas, but few are exclusively Coptic. Likewise, there are few areas that are exclusively Muslim.'

'...In addition to the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, there are approximately 2,800 registered churches throughout Egypt, compared to approximately 108,400 mosques.'⁶

4.3.4 The Wall Street Journal in Five Things to Know About Egypt's Coptic Christians reported that:

'Coptic Christians are a minority in Egypt but still constitute the largest single Christian community in the Middle East. The Egyptian Government estimates about five million Copts, but the Coptic Orthodox Church says 15-18 million. Reliable numbers are hard to find but estimates suggest they make up somewhere between 6 percent and 18 percent of the population. Most Copts are Egyptian, although there are significant pockets of them in Syria, Libya, Jordan and other countries, including in the West.'

'The vast majority of Egyptians are Muslims, but Coptic Christians have held varying degrees of political and economic power over the centuries.'⁷

4.3.5 According to Freedom House in their 2016 Annual Report:

'Coptic Christians, who account for some 10 percent of the population, are allocated 24 of the Parliament's 120 party-list seats and the 2015 election results indicate that their representation is almost entirely dependent on this quota system. The Coptic Church leadership has allied itself with President Sisi since the coup, apparently to ensure the security of its constituents. The party-list quotas also set aside small numbers of seats for women, workers and farmers, people under 35, people with disabilities and Egyptians living abroad.'⁸

[Back to Contents](#)

5. Legal rights

5.1 Constitution

5.1.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts observed that:

'... the new Constitution recognises the three 'heavenly religions' of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and grants Copts similar rights and freedom to other Egyptians. The Coptic Orthodox Church, represented by the Pope, is recognised by the state as an official denomination of Christianity. Article 2 of the new Constitution lists Sharia as a major source of legislation, but

⁶ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 2: Background Information, Paragraph 2.2, 2.3, 2.14, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 10 Oct 2016

⁷ The Wall Street Journal, Five Things to Know About Egypt's Coptic Christians, 16 February 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2015/02/16/5-five-things-to-know-about-egypts-coptic-christians/> Date accessed: 5 Sep 2016

⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2016 Egypt, Section B, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/egypt> Date accessed: 9 Sep 2016

Article 3 states that non-Muslims have the right to resort to their own legislation in relation to social affairs (including marriage and divorce) and religious leadership. The Constitution bans religiously-based parties, and requires the next Egyptian Parliament to legislate to allow Christians to build and repair churches...'

'The [2014 Constitution](#) introduced a number of provisions which guarantee equal opportunity for all citizens without discrimination (Article 9); guarantee equality regardless of gender (Article 11); and prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, colour, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason (Article 53). 'The Constitution commits Egypt to respect all international human rights instruments to which it is a signatory.'

'Significantly, the January 2014 Constitution is the first to outline and recognise how the different layers of Egyptian history have created Egyptian identity. The new Constitution acknowledges Coptic Christian history in Egypt, in addition to Pharaonic, Greco-Roman and Islamic histories, and also identifies Egypt as a Mediterranean country.'⁹

5.1.2 According to USCIRF 2016:

'Egypt continued its volatile political transition following the military's 2013 ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi. In January 2014, a new Constitution was approved overwhelmingly by referendum, and in May 2014, al-Sisi was elected President. Following delays, parliamentary elections occurred in stages starting in October 2015 and concluded in December 2015. The Parliament was seated in January 2016 and is comprised of 596 members, including an unprecedented 36 Christians. The improved religious freedom provisions in the Constitution have not yet been implemented, although the Parliament is mandated to take action before the completion of its first session.'¹⁰

5.1.3 The report further stated that:

'There are some encouraging changes in the 2014 Constitution that could bode well for religious freedom. Several problematic provisions from the 2012 Constitution were removed: a provision that narrowly defined Islamic Shari'ah law; a provision potentially giving Al-Azhar a consultative role in reviewing legislation; and a provision that effectively banned blasphemy. While Article 64 provides that "freedom of belief is absolute," this article limits the freedom to practice religious rituals and establish places of worship to only the "Abrahamic" religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. A new provision, Article 235, requires the incoming Parliament to pass a law governing the building and renovating of churches. This would potentially lift

⁹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.1 to 3.3, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 10 Oct 2016

¹⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Background and Egypt's Constitution, April 2016, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF 2016 Annual Report.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf) Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

the longstanding requirement of governmental approval for building or repairing churches, which has served as a justification for sectarian-related violence targeting Christians.’

‘...In addition, Article 53 mandates the establishment of an independent anti-discrimination commission, the jurisdiction of which would include discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.’¹¹

5.1.4 Human Rights Watch continued that:

‘The government had negotiated the law’s provisions with Coptic Church leaders in secrecy with almost no involvement from non-governmental groups or activists. The church eventually supported the law, but other Coptic priests, activists, local human rights groups and some Coptic Members of Parliament criticized restrictions that continue to discriminate against Christians.’¹²

5.1.5 Human Rights Watch claim that:

‘Such restrictions amount to discrimination on the grounds of religion, imposed on Christians without justification’¹³.

[Back to Contents](#)

5.2 Blasphemy laws

5.2.1 The 2016 USCIRF report noted that:

‘Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code prohibits citizens from “ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.” Authorities use this “contempt-of-religion,” or blasphemy law to detain, prosecute and imprison members of religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs or whose activities are alleged to jeopardize “communal harmony” or insult Judaism, Christianity or Islam.’¹⁴

5.2.2 According to Mada Masr, an online Egyptian newspaper in their article, Four Coptic Teenagers Tried for Insulting Religion:

‘International organisations like the New York-based Human Rights Watch have criticized Egypt’s blasphemy laws, saying they curtail freedom of expression, which is guaranteed by the Egyptian Constitution. There have been a number of blasphemy cases in recent months. Poet, journalist and

¹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Background and Egypt’s Constitution, April 2016, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF 2016 Annual Report.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%2016%20Annual%20Report.pdf) Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

¹² Human Rights Watch, Egypt: New Church law discriminates against Christians, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians> Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

¹³ Human Rights Watch, Egypt: New Church law discriminates against Christians, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians> Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

¹⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Background and Egypt’s Constitution, April 2016, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF 2016 Annual Report.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%2016%20Annual%20Report.pdf) Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

ex-parliamentary candidate Fatima Naoot was sentenced to three years in prison and a LE20,000 fine for contempt of religion. Naoot was tried for criticizing the tradition of sacrificing animals during Eid al-Adha in a Facebook post.’

‘...In another recent case, TV host and preacher Islam al-Beheiry was sentenced to a year in prison for insulting Islam on his controversial TV show “With Islam.” Ibrahim hopes the prominent and well-publicized cases of Naoot and Beheiry will spark outrage and create public pressure to change Egypt’s blasphemy laws.’¹⁵

[Back to Contents](#)

5.3 Conversion and proselytising laws

5.3.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts noted:

‘There is no statutory prohibition on conversion from Islam to other religions in Egypt. However, officials — including courts — frequently interpret sharia as prohibiting Muslims from converting to another religion and refuse to recognise such conversions legally. By contrast, converts to Islam will generally have their conversions recognised, and their identity cards changed accordingly without difficulty or delay.’¹⁶

5.3.2 The same report noted that:

‘Converts from Islam to other religions are not generally subject to officially sanctioned violence, detention or surveillance. However, they encounter significant practical difficulties that in their scope and consequence amount to a high degree of official discrimination. Failure to amend a convert’s national identity card (and corresponding record) to recognise their new religious affiliation has ramifications on personal status issues, such as marriage, divorce, and the state’s view of the religious identity of any children (Egyptian children obtain a national identity card at age 16, with their religious identity generally matching that of their parents’—or their Muslim parent, in the case of a mixed marriage.)’

‘...Christians designated as ‘Muslim’ on their identity cards (irrespective of whether they were born to Christian or Muslim families) will generally face difficulty being married in a Christian ceremony. Any children born to that person will be considered Muslim by the state, and at age 16, will have ‘Muslim’ written on their identity card...’

‘In addition, converts from Islam face significant societal discrimination in the form of rejection and ostracism from their families or communities. Such discrimination tends to be worse in poorer or rural areas, where more conservative values are tightly held. The level of discrimination would likely

¹⁵ Mada Masr, Four Coptic Teenagers Tried for Insulting Religion, 31 January 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/01/31/news/u/four-coptic-teenagers-tried-for-insulting-religion/>
Date accessed: 10 Oct 2016

¹⁶ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.10 to 3.13, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

increase if the convert undertakes activities, such as proselytising, in relation to his or her conversion. There have been instances where converts from Islam have been accused of defamation of religion.¹⁷

5.3.3 According to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report 2015:

‘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.’

‘...While neither the Constitution or 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....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 extra-legal repercussions from authorities and local Islamists.’¹⁸

5.3.4 The same 2015 USIRF report noted that:

‘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... Some Christians, however, reported difficulty or long delays in obtaining the paperwork required to complete the process, which a prominent lawyer stated was due to government pressure against church authorities.’¹⁹

[Back to Contents](#)

5.4 Anti-discrimination laws

5.4.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts noted:

‘The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a decree in October 2011 which amended the Egyptian Criminal Code (Law 58–1937) to explicitly prohibit religious and other forms of discrimination. Decree 126–2011 provides for tough sanctions against individuals who discriminate

¹⁷ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.10 to 3.13, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

¹⁸ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Legal Framework and Government Practices, April 2016
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 14 Sep 2016

¹⁹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Legal Framework and Government Practices, April 2016
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 14 Sep 2016

against other persons based on gender, race, ethnic origin, language, religion or creed. The law amended Article 161 of the Egyptian Criminal Code by imposing a minimum fine of EGP30,000 (AUD5,110) and a maximum fine of EGP50,000 (AUD8,516) on perpetrators of acts of discrimination. The amended law also penalises government officials who commit a discriminatory act, with a maximum fine of EGP100,000 (AUD17,032) and three months imprisonment. However, it is often difficult to prove that discrimination has taken place. DFAT is not aware of any successful prosecutions under the amended law (as of November 2015).'

'As an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, Egyptian laws and long-standing practices are generally designed to safeguard the majority. While anti-discriminatory laws exist, these can be difficult to implement. In practice, legal protections are implemented unevenly and Copts experience some discrimination, particularly in rural areas.'²⁰

[Back to Contents](#)

5.5 Personal status laws

5.5.1 According to the 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts:

'Personal status issues (such as marriage, divorce and inheritance) are delegated to religious institutions in Egypt for Muslims, Christians and Jews. For Muslims, personal status rules (derived from Sharia) are contained in legislation adopted by Parliament or Presidential decrees. Family Courts apply this legislation to Muslim couples, Muslims married to Christians, and married Christian couples who belong to different denominations. For other recognised religious communities (Christians and Jews), the religious authorities themselves adopt personal status rules, based on relevant religious doctrine. These rules are considered equivalent to administrative decisions and are subject to review in Egyptian Courts.'²¹

5.5.2 The report further noted that:

'Egypt is a socially conservative country where very few couples cohabit outside of marriage in both urban and rural areas. There is no civil marriage in Egypt such as it is understood in Australia —the state administers marriages between Muslims in accordance with Sharia; and Christians must seek marriage under church institutions before obtaining a marriage contract from the state. All marriages must be registered with the Ministry of Justice, which issues official marriage certificates. Both Muslim and Christian religious authorities are strongly opposed to the concept of civil marriage.'²²

²⁰ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.1, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

²¹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

²² Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

5.6 Construction and renovation of churches laws

5.6.1 The USCIRF report noted in regard to the Constitution, that:

‘A new provision, Article 235, requires the incoming Parliament to pass a law governing the building and renovating of churches. This would potentially lift the longstanding requirement of governmental approval for building or repairing churches, which has served as a justification for sectarian-related violence targeting Christians. In addition, Article 53 mandates the establishment of an independent anti-discrimination commission, the jurisdiction of which would include discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.’²³

5.6.2 According to Human Rights Watch, in their article, Egypt: New Church Law Discriminates Against Christians, September 2016:

‘[The] long-awaited new law maintains restrictions over the construction and renovation of churches and discriminates against the Christian minority in Egypt. The law, passed by Egypt’s Parliament on 30 August 2016, applies only to Christian houses of worship.’

‘...The new law allows Governors to deny church-building permits with no stated way to appeal, requires that churches be built “commensurate with” the number of Christians in the area and contains security provisions that risk subjecting decisions on whether to allow church construction to the whims of violent mobs..... For decades, Egypt’s Courts interpreted an 1856 Ottoman decree as giving the President sole power to permit church construction. In 1934, the MOI set out restrictive rules for church construction. More recently, several Egyptian Governments discussed issuing a “unified” law for houses of worship for all religions, but this did not happen. Article 235 of Egypt’s 2014 Constitution obliged the next Parliament to issue, in its first term, a law regulating churches “in a manner that guarantees the freedom to practice religious rituals for Christians.”’²⁴

5.6.3 Associated Press in their article, Egypt's New Law on Churches Angers Christian Critics noted that:

‘Local authorities often refuse to give building permits for new churches, fearing protests by Muslim ultraconservatives. Faced with refusals, Christians turned to building illegally or setting up churches in other buildings, which in many cases prompted riots and attacks by ultraconservatives. In contrast, building a mosque faces few restrictions.’

‘...Christians had hoped that the law would enshrine broad rights to build, encouraged by promises from President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi. However, the

²³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2016, Egypt, Egypt’s Constitution, April 2016, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Egypt%202014.pdf>
Date accessed: 9 Sep 2016

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, Egypt: New Church law discriminates against Christians, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians>
Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

law left critics, including some Christian lawmakers, embittered, warning that it will maintain Christian's second-class status. The Coptic Orthodox Church, to which most Egyptian Christians belong, had at first opposed the bill but later backed it — and critics say it bowed to heavy government pressure. Under the law, Christians must apply to the local provincial governor when they want to build a church.'

5.6.4 The article further stated that:

'The law "empowers the majority to decide whether the minority has the right to hold their religious practices," said Ishaq Ibrahim, a top researcher in the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.'

'Christian activist and researcher Nader Shukry said the security and order provisions connected to the law still mean authorities can still use threats of mob violence as an excuse to ban church construction.'²⁵

[Back to Contents](#)

6. State attitude and treatment

6.1 Political situation

6.1.1 The Minority Rights Group International, in their 2016 Annual Report noted that:

'...Egypt's sizeable Coptic Christian minority [has long] been victims of discrimination and persecution, who to some extent have benefitted from recent political reforms under Sisi. For example, Egypt's national elections in October 2015 saw Coptic Christians win 36 parliamentary seats, 6 percent of the total – an unprecedented achievement that represents an important milestone for the community. This has been accompanied by Sisi's apparent efforts to engage the Coptic church leadership, highlighted by his historic attendance of Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015 – the first time a head of state has done so – as well as his offering of personal condolences to Pope Tawadros II in February 2015 after 21 Egyptian Copts were killed by ISIS militants in Libya. Yet despite these conciliatory gestures, Coptic Egyptians remain marginalized by state institutions and face ongoing risks of sectarian violence.'²⁶

6.1.2 The 2016 USCIRF Report stated that:

'During the past year, the government's efforts to combat extremism and terrorism have had a chilling impact on human rights and civil society activities in the country.'

²⁵ Associated Press, Egypt's New Law on Churches Angers Christian Critics, 30 August 2016 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/4314cdbc4eaa4eabb78f9735eac8781e/egypt-approves-law-churches-despite-christian-opposition> Date accessed: 2 Nov 2016

²⁶ Minority Rights Group International, State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 – Egypt, 12 July 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=5796083a6&skip=0&query=Coptic%20christians&coi=EGY&searchin=title&sort=date> Date accessed: 19 Oct 2016

‘Against a backdrop of deteriorating human rights conditions, the Egyptian Government has taken positive steps to address some religious freedom concerns, including intolerance in religious curricula and extremism in religious discourse. In addition, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi continued to make public statements encouraging religious tolerance and moderation... There were notably fewer sectarian attacks against Christians and other religious minorities, and investigations and prosecutions continued for the unprecedented scale of destruction of churches and Christian property that occurred in the summer of 2013. However, other past large-scale sectarian incidents have not resulted in prosecutions, which continued to foster a climate of impunity.’

‘In addition, the longstanding discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief remain in place. During [2015], there was an increase in Egyptian Courts prosecuting, convicting, and imprisoning Egyptian citizens for blasphemy and related charges. While the 2014 constitution includes improvements regarding freedom of religion or belief, the interpretation and implementation of relevant provisions remain to be seen, since the newly seated parliament has yet to act on the provisions. Based on these ongoing concerns, for the sixth year in a row, USCIRF recommends in 2016 that Egypt be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF will continue to monitor the situation closely to determine if positive developments warrant a change in Egypt's status during the year ahead.’²⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

6.2 Prosecution for blasphemy and defamation

6.2.1 The 2016 USCIRF Report stated that:

‘Blasphemy cases have increased since 2011 and this trend continued during the reporting period (01/02/2015 – 29/02/2016). While the majority of charges are levelled against Sunni Muslims, most of those sentenced by a Court to prison terms for blasphemy have been Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and Atheists, largely based on flawed trials. According to Egyptian human rights groups, there was a sharp increase in new blasphemy cases between the beginning of 2015 and the end of the reporting period.’

6.2.2 The report gave further details stating that:

‘In April 2015, four Coptic Christian teenagers and their teacher were arrested and charged with blasphemy for making a short, private video mocking ISIL. In February 2016, three of the four teens were sentenced to five years in prison and the fourth was placed in a juvenile facility. In December 2015, the teacher was sentenced to three years in prison in a

²⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Key Findings, April 2016, [http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF 2016 Annual Report.pdf](http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf) Date accessed: 19 Oct 2016

separate trial and was expelled from his village. Appeals for both cases are ongoing.²⁸

6.2.3 Mada Masr, an online Egyptian newspaper reported the same case in their article, Four Coptic Teenagers Tried for Insulting Religion and noted that 'Mina Thabet, a researcher on religious minorities at the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, told Mada Masr the case was opened after villagers pressured the authorities to investigate.'²⁹

6.2.4 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts noted that:

'There have been some examples where blasphemy cases against Copts have been dismissed, most notably in the case of high-profile Coptic billionaire Naguib Sawiris in March 2012. However, although instances of blasphemy prosecutions against Copts are few, lower-profile Copts accused of blasphemy rarely has an adequate right of defence and are generally convicted, especially outside Cairo. DFAT assesses that Copts are more likely to face prosecution under the defamation law and are more likely to be convicted than Sunni Muslims, but face a similar likelihood of prosecution and conviction to members of other religious minority communities (including Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is and declared Atheists).'30

6.2.5 The Minority Rights Group International, in their 2016 Annual Report noted that:

'Blasphemy accusations and related attacks remain a serious problem for Egypt's religious minorities, particularly Copts and Shi'a. Following 15 similar blasphemy cases earlier in the year [2015] for insulting Islam – a crime under the Egyptian Penal Code outlawing ridicule of the three Abrahamic faiths – in July [2015], three Coptic men were arrested for distributing bags of dates containing messages proclaiming their 'Lord's' beneficence . Earlier, in a Beni Suef village at the end of May [2015], a Coptic man was accused of posting cartoons offensive to the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook, resulting in more than ten Coptic homes being attacked with rocks and Molotov cocktails and the eventual forcible displacement of Coptic families from the village.'³¹

6.2.6 The United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 for Egypt noted:

²⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Blasphemy Law and Limits on Religious Expression, April 2016, http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf Date accessed: 7 Sep 2016

²⁹ Mada Masr, Four Coptic Teenagers Tried for Insulting Religion, 31 January 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/01/31/news/u/four-coptic-teenagers-tried-for-insulting-religion/> Date accessed: 10 Oct 2016

³⁰ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Blasphemy/Defamation of Religion, Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.10, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

³¹ Minority Rights Group International, State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 – Egypt, 12 July 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=5796083a6&skip=0&query=Coptic%20christians&coi=EGY&searchin=title&sort=date> Date accessed: 9 Sep 2016

'In 2015, the local and international rights groups reported increased charges under the blasphemy law, primarily targeting Christians but also Atheists...'³²

6.2.7 Eshhad and The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in their article, Eshhad Issue Brief: Egypt's Blasphemy Laws noted that:

'Some 41 percent of blasphemy cases are filed against Christians, though they make up only about 10 percent of Egypt's population. Such cases often rest on flimsy evidence, including Facebook posts. In one prominent case, Kirolos Shawky Atallah was convicted after liking a Facebook page that later posted anti-Islamic materials.....In another prominent case, a Coptic teacher in Luxor, Dimyana Obeid Abdel Nour, was charged in June 2013 with "denigrating Islam" after students accused her of insulting the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson. In June 2014, an appeals court upheld her six-month sentence, overturning an earlier ruling that only imposed a fine. In July 2015, three Christians were charged with "showing contempt for Islam" in Alexandria after distributing dates at sunset during Ramadan that had Bible verses on their packaging; their case was dropped in February 2016. In September 2015, Maher Fayez, an 18-year-old student in Beni Suef, was accused of blasphemy for comments he made on Facebook that allegedly insulted Islam and spent three months in jail without being tried.'

'While the state is the official judicial authority in Egypt, the tremendous influence of al-Azhar—the Sunni mosque and university establishment—allows its clerics to serve as unofficial enforcers of blasphemy laws. For example, in May 2015, television presenter Islam al-Beheiry was charged with blasphemy after the authorities at al-Azhar filed a complaint that his program "made people question what is certain in religion." After nearly a year of trials and appeals, Beheiry was convicted in February 2016 and will serve one year in prison. In September 2015 al-Azhar officials demanded that several Cairo booksellers stop selling the "anti-Islamic" book 'Blasphemy in Egypt' and threatened to file charges of blasphemy if they did not comply.'

'While under Sisi, who claims to protect Egypt's minorities, officials' statements have been more positive, the use of blasphemy charges continues unabated. There have been more charges of blasphemy under Sisi than there were under Morsi.'³³

[Back to Contents](#)

³² United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015, Section 2, Freedom of Speech and Press, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253133.pdf>
Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

³³ Eshhad and The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), Eshhad Issue Brief: Egypt's Blasphemy Laws, Al-Azhar As An Unofficial Enforcer of Blasphemy Laws, March 2016 http://eshhad.timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Blasphemy_MR_WEB.pdf Date accessed: 20 Sep 2016

6.3 Converts to Christianity

6.3.1 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2014 has said that:

'Islam, Christianity, or Judaism may be indicated in the religion field on national identity cards. Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, the government does not recognize conversion from Islam in practice, and Muslim-born citizens who leave Islam for another religion may not change the religion field on their identity cards.'³⁴

6.3.2 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015 has said that:

'Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity previously known as Mohamed Hegazy, was sentenced to five years in prison following his 2013 arrest for "illegally filming demonstrations to stir international public opinion against Egypt." 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 appeal. However, police immediately re-arrested Boulous on accusations of denigration of Islam in 2009...

'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 MOI in 2007 for not allowing him to change his legal religious identity from Muslim to Christian. The administrative court ruled in favour of the MOI. Authorities subsequently held Boulous in pre-trial detention illegally, having exceeded the maximum pretrial detention period of six months. 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.'³⁵

6.3.3 The same source noted that:

'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

³⁴ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2014 Egypt, Section 2 – Legal Framework, October 2015 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238664.pdf> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

³⁵ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

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.³⁶

6.3.4 The USCIRF 2013 also noted this point:

‘Egyptian-born Muslims who have converted to Christianity cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases, these converts also face intense social hostility. In past cases where converts have sued for the right to reflect their new religious affiliation on ID cards, Egyptian Courts have ruled that Muslims are forbidden from converting from Islam based on principles of Islamic law because conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and entice other Muslims to convert.’³⁷

6.3.5 OpenDemocracy in their article, Persecution Lurks for Converts from Islam in Egypt has stated that:

‘In Egypt, one’s religious affiliation is registered and noted on ID cards, and while changing it to Islam is permitted, changing it from Islam is regarded as blasphemous and forbidden, leaving many converts and Atheists not sure of their religious identity. Children of converts, too, are forced to take on the label of Muslim, preventing them from attending Christian classes or marrying in church... Conversion from Islam has long been a controversial issue deeply entangled with the question over religious freedom in Egypt. While the Egyptian Constitution holds that freedom of religion is “absolute” in practice, discrimination is a lurking threat for non-Muslims, Atheists and Shia.’³⁸

6.3.6 The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response of 27 November 2013, quoting an independent journalist noted that a convert from Islam to Christianity attempting to obtain a passport ‘should not have a problem as Egyptian passports do not state the person's religion in the data page.’³⁹

6.3.7 The response went on to say, citing other sources, that:

³⁶ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

³⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2013 Annual Report: Egypt, Converts and Reconverts to Christianity, April 2013, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf) Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

³⁸ openDemocracy, Persecution Lurks for Converts from Islam in Egypt, 6 August 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/johannes-makar/persecution-lurks-for-converts-from-islam-in-egypt> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

³⁹ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Whether people who have converted from Islam to Christianity, particularly those converts who have been arrested, are able to obtain passports and leave the country (April 2010-November 2013), 27 November 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52ce9aa64.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

'...a convert was not legally barred from receiving a card but that "if [the convert] tries to get an identification card he will be given one stating that he is a Moslem". ... The independent journalist stated that there have been cases in which persons who are attempting to change the religious status on their ID card or obtain passports "have been harassed by Security Services," but added that this was done in an "extra-legal manner" (Independent Journalist 10 Nov. 2013). ... An Associate Professor of political and international studies at Trinity Western University stated that "the difficulty of individuals seeking a religion change on their government-issued identity card is well-documented" and that "[t]his would extend also to having new identity documents issued by the government, including a passport". The Associate Professor considered that the "difficulties would include extensive questioning, arbitrary arrest and detention, harassment and confiscation of identity documents required for the passport" and that "it would be the exceptional case in which a Muslim convert to Christianity would not have difficulties getting official documents." (Associate Professor 8 November 2013)⁴⁰

6.3.8 According to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015:

'On 18 November [2015], 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, 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 uncertain at the year's end [2015].'⁴¹

[Back to Contents](#)

6.4 Building and renovation of churches

6.4.1 The USSD IRF report 2015 noted:

'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 churches, he also reported. A total of 29 buildings in 24 locations were yet to be restored. In August 2013, the

⁴⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Whether people who have converted from Islam to Christianity, particularly those converts who have been arrested, are able to obtain passports and leave the country (April 2010-November 2013), 27 November 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52ce9aa64.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁴¹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 3 – Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

government had announced the army would rebuild destroyed churches at its expense.⁴²

6.4.2 Catholic Herald in their article, Coptic Catholic Church Welcomes New Egyptian Law on Building Churches, 6 September 2016 has noted that:

‘The Coptic Catholic Church has welcomed the new Egyptian law to facilitate the building of Christian places of worship. On 30 August 2016, Egypt passed a law codifying the rights of Christians to build and renovate churches in the mostly Muslim country. Under the new 10-article law, approved by the Egyptian Parliament, Regional Governors must rule within four months on Christian church-building and renovation applications and provide a “justified decision,” subject to appeal, if refusing authorisation.’

‘Critics have warned some provisions are vaguely worded and say clauses requiring the size of a church to be “commensurate with the number of Christian community members,” taking account of “expected population growth,” could be used by local officials to block permits. “There’ve been some criticisms, but the government has tried to resolve any problems, and we now have a law which meets modern needs,” said Father Rafic Greiche, spokesman for the Coptic Catholic Church.’

‘Priests who ministered in Egypt under the old law said any permit that had to do with a church building had to be signed by the President. One priest said he waited 21 years for a permit to build churches. They also said state or local officials could stop construction for “security issues.” One priest cited the example of a mosque being built next to a Catholic church, and local authorities closed the church because Muslim authorities complained the long Sunday liturgies interfered with their noon call to prayer.’⁴³

6.4.3 According to the Associated Press in their article, Egypt's New Law on Churches Angers Christian Critics has stated that:

‘Angry critics in the community [have stated] that the law will only enshrine the restrictions. Church building has for decades been one of the most sensitive sectarian issues in Egypt, where 10 percent of the population of 90 million are Christians but where Muslim hardliners sharply oppose anything they see as undermining what they call the country's "Islamic character.”’⁴⁴

6.4.4 According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reporting in September 2016:

‘Sectarian attacks continue to occur in Egypt whenever Christian communities are suspected of using homes or other buildings as places of

⁴² United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

⁴³ Catholic Herald, Coptic Catholic Church Welcomes New Egyptian Law on Building Churches, 6 September 2016 <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/09/06/coptic-catholic-church-welcomes-new-egyptian-law-on-building-churches/> Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁴⁴ Associated Press, Egypt's New Law on Churches Angers Christian Critics, 30 August 2016 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/4314cdbc4eaa4eabb78f9735eac8781e/egypt-approves-law-churches-despite-christian-opposition> Date accessed: 2 Nov 2016

worship. CSW recently reported on a spike in the frequency of these attacks, largely in the Governorates of Upper Egypt, where false rumours of Christian properties being used as churches have resulted in damage or destruction.⁴⁵

6.4.5 In another report, CSW reported that:

'homes belonging to Coptic families in Saft al-Kharsah village in Beni Suef Province, Upper Egypt, were destroyed by a mob on 22 July [2016] amid rumours that one storey of a man's home was being turned into a church.'⁴⁶

6.4.6 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts has noted that:

'Copts can face problems if they do not notify officials of their intentions to build a church (or convert an existing building into a church) in accordance with the law. Building a church without permission can result in threats of demolition by the police; actual destruction; prosecution and imprisonment of those responsible and financial penalties equivalent to the relevant building fees...'

'Obtaining permission to build or restore churches has been particularly problematic in Upper Egypt. Some Upper Egypt villages have the same number of churches today as they did several decades ago, whereas the number of mosques in those villages has significantly increased (despite no corresponding shift in the population levels of the respective communities). Local Muslim communities have frequently made the construction of churches difficult by building mosques adjacent to areas the Coptic community has designated for a church (pending permission). This practice has continued under the Sisi Government.'⁴⁷

6.4.7 The Minority Rights Group International, in their 2016 Annual Report notes that:

'One area where the state has failed in its protection of the community is the continued barriers to constructing houses of worship for non-Muslims, a legacy of the Ottoman era legislation. Particularly in Upper Egypt, this has long contributed to the targeting of Coptic congregations and their religious practices. While authorities have reportedly objected less to church construction and renovations since Sisi took power, the community has still faced tremendous difficulties in securing official approval and support. In the village of al-Galaa, for example, after the reconstruction of a church was blocked by local Muslims, the Coptic community was forced amid rising sectarian tensions to agree to rebuild it without a bell or tower – a typical outcome of coercive reconciliation processes backed by local authorities...

'In the same week, police raided the Saint Youssef al-Bar prayer house near Maghagha, confiscating religious paraphernalia and accusing occupants of

⁴⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Parliament Passes Controversial Law, 7 September 2016 <http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/09/07/news/3245/article.htm> Date accessed: 3 Nov 2016

⁴⁶ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Egyptian Security Urged to Act After Latest Attack, 1 August 2016 <http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/08/01/news/3202/article.htm> Date accessed: 3 Nov 2016

⁴⁷ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3, Construction/Restoration of Churches, Paragraphs 3.13- 3.14, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 22 Sep 2016

praying in a property illegally without official permission. In Abu Qurqas, police abruptly arrived and shut down reconstruction on part of a village church. These and other incidents have occurred despite Article 235 of the 2014 Constitution.'

'...For his part, in a speech in January 2016, Sisi lamented the failure of authorities to repair Coptic properties damaged in violent episodes during 2013, promising that 'by 2017 there would not be a single church or house that is not restored' – a claim met with scepticism by many.'⁴⁸

6.4.8 According to the 2016 USCIRF Report:

'Over the past year, the number and severity of violent incidents targeting Copts and their property decreased significantly when compared to previous years. However, sporadic violence continued, particularly in Upper Egypt. For example, in June 2015, at the time of the two-year anniversary of the overthrow of former President Morsi, a number of Christian homes and properties were attacked, and in July 2015, a mob firebombed a church in Alexandria and authorities reportedly responded slowly. In March [2015], local police failed to prevent a mob attack on a Coptic church in the al-Our village, the hometown of 13 of the 20 Copts killed in Libya. In some parts of the country, Egyptian security services increased protection of churches during significant religious holidays, which lessened the level of fear and insecurity among members of the Coptic community.'⁴⁹

6.4.9 According to NY Times, in their September 2016 article, Egypt's Christians Say They Are at a 'Breaking Point'

'Copts are also concerned that they have been unable to get permission to open new churches, which is often refused by the police on security grounds. In the Minya bishopric alone, which has 100 churches, 150 villages have no church, but few new ones have opened. In Ismailia, for instance, the Copts have built two new churches in recent years, but have yet to start using them, denied permission to do so on security grounds. Instead, they received permission to pray in a tent outside one of the churches, but the tent recently burned down.'

...'Two young men accused of setting the fire were immediately released, returning to a hero's welcome in the community, Christians from the village said in interviews. "The police say they can't open because of security concerns?" said Abram Samir, a lay church official. "It's their responsibility to protect me and let me have my rights."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Minority Rights Group International, State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 – Egypt, 12 July 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=5796083a6&skip=0&query=Coptic%20christians&coi=EGY&searchin=title&sort=date> Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁴⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Coptic Christians, April 2016, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁵⁰ NY Times, Middle East - Egypt's Christians Say They Are at a 'Breaking Point,' 4 September 2016,

6.5 State protection

6.5.1 According to the 2016 USCIRF Report:

‘Repressive laws and discriminatory policies against Copts remain in place, including blasphemy charges and convictions, limits on building and maintaining churches and limits on conversion from Islam. There also continues to be inadequate accountability for past violent attacks. Most perpetrators from large-scale incidents that occurred between 2011 and 2013 – and even before that – have not been prosecuted. The inability to successfully prosecute those responsible for past violence against Copts and other religious minorities has continued to foster an atmosphere of impunity.’⁵¹

6.5.2 According to the DFAT 2015 Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts:

‘The decrease in general law and order in Egypt in the years following the January 2011 revolution contributed to a general rise in crime and civil disorder throughout the country at that time. The police have actively restored their presence and authority since the July 2013 military intervention and the election of President Sisi. Security forces have usually been successful in preventing communal friction from getting out of control, often by intervening to restore order or promising compensation for damage.’

‘...In rural areas, authorities have encouraged the use of traditional justice mechanisms such as community Reconciliation Committees to resolve communal tensions, instead of a law enforcement approach. Despite occasional incidents, a more substantial police presence in urban areas has enabled Copts to live there in greater security. The level of police presence in rural and poorer areas is generally less than in the cities, and as a consequence Copts are less safe in these areas.’⁵²

6.5.3 The report also noted that:

‘DFAT assesses that on a day-to-day basis in urban areas, the state has a capacity and willingness to provide protection to Copts, and generally does so. Copts facing harassment are able to go to a local police station for protection in these areas. DFAT assesses that, under the Sisi Government, the security services see it as being in their interest to be responsive to Coptic grievances. However, societal discrimination may impact on the level of protection offered to Copts by individual security officials.’⁵³

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/world/middleeast/egypt-middleeast-copts-christians.html?_r=1

Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

⁵¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Coptic Christians, April 2016, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁵² Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, State Protection, Paragraphs 5.1- 5.4, 24 November 2015 Copy on request. Date accessed: 22 Sep 2016

⁵³ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian

- 6.5.4 According to Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), citing a range of sources:

'In its 2015 annual report, Amnesty International (AI) states that Egyptian authorities "failed to tackle discrimination against religious minorities, including Coptic Christians" (AI 2015). According to CSW, there are "longstanding allegations that the authorities have failed to provide sufficient protection" for the Coptic community and that "inadequate police response has engendered a climate of impunity" (CSW 26 September 2014). Human Rights Watch indicates that, "in many cases, authorities failed to intervene" in attacks on Christian establishments (29 January 2015). According to the Assistant Professor, there have been complaints by Copts that the police are slow to respond, and "cannot be relied upon to protect Copts in situations of targeted violence" (Assistant Professor 14 April 2015). The Assistant Professor indicated that, "[m]ostly, the perpetrators do not get prosecuted because the government opts for conciliation meetings and the charges are dropped or not pursued" (ibid.). The same source indicated that "in almost all cases" victims must drop charges against those who damaged their properties or assaulted them in order to "buy peace" and sometimes people also choose to leave the area, usually moving to cities (ibid.).'⁵⁴

- 6.5.5 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015 has said that:

'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 organisation. 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'.⁵⁵

- 6.5.6 Also according to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015:

'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

Copts, Section 5, State Protection, Paragraphs 5.1- 5.4, 24 November 2015 Copy on request. Date accessed: 22 Sep 2016

⁵⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), 8 May 2015 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁵⁵ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

led to outcomes unfavourable to minority parties, and precluded recourse to the judicial system in most cases, according to human rights groups.⁵⁶

6.5.7 The same report also noted:

'...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 3 September 2015, 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 29 April 2015, 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.'⁵⁷

6.5.8 The January 2016 Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted with regards to Discrimination and violence against Copts that:

'The Committee takes note of the measures taken by the State party to combat discrimination and violence against ethno-religious minorities, particularly the violence that has resulted in the destruction of Coptic property and churches. It remains concerned, however, about the scale of the intolerance and violence to which they have been subjected, including in cases involving the taking of hostages and kidnapping of Coptic women. It is further concerned about the limited measures taken by the State party to promote freedom of religion and religious diversity among ethnic minorities' (arts. 5 and 6).⁵⁸

6.5.9 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015 stated that:

'Government representatives continued to participate in and sometimes lead informal "reconciliation sessions" to address incidents of sectarian violence and tension, which adopted findings favouring members of the majority Muslim community most of the time, according to human rights groups.'⁵⁹

⁵⁶ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Executive Summary, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

⁵⁷ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁵⁸ UN, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined seventeenth to twenty-second periodic reports of Egypt*, 6 January 2016, para 21 http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1465551784_g1600175.pdf Date accessed: 2 Nov 2016

⁵⁹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date

6.5.10 According to Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), citing a range of sources:

‘According to the Assistant Professor, "witnesses often say that the [authorities'] response is more about calming the situation down than investigating and locating the people responsible" (Assistant Professor 14 April 2015). Similarly, the Professor stated that this pattern of response tends to settle tensions for a time, but is "not a permanent solution" to the problems of sectarian violence (Professor 17 April 2015).’⁶⁰

6.5.11 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015 has noted that:

‘The government sometimes participated in or failed to prosecute desecration of religious property. On 3 April [2015], 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.’⁶¹

6.5.12 The same report noted that:

‘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 honour, 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 hard-line 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 families of victims. Authorities announced streets would be named after some of the victims.’ This, among other actions of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is seen by Christian leaders as positive signals that Christians are full members of Egyptian society.’⁶²

6.5.13 According to Al Monitor, in their article - What do recent attacks mean for future of Egypt's Christians? – July 2016 ‘Tensions have long simmered between Muslims and Christians in Egypt and sectarian attacks have

accessed: 21 Sep 2016

⁶⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), 8 May 2015

<http://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁶¹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Executive Summary, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

⁶² United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Executive Summary, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 19 Sept 2016

escalated since the Arab Spring. In recent weeks and months, there has been a marked increase in religiously motivated violence.’⁶³

6.5.14 The report continued that:

‘...Analysts believe that the worrisome spike in persecution of Coptic Christians is the price Christians are paying for supporting President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and particularly for their stance on the military-backed protests that led to the overthrow of Morsi. Indeed, Christians had seen then-Defence Minister Sisi as their saviour from the Islamists and had thrown their full weight behind his candidacy for President. In August 2013, when at least 800 Morsi supporters were killed by security forces in the violent dispersal of two pro-Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Cairo, scores of Brotherhood supporters went on a rampage, burning churches and destroying property of Christians in "revenge attacks" in several parts of the country, according to local media reports.’

‘...Admittedly, Sisi has tried harder than his predecessors to win over Christians: He has vowed to bring the perpetrators of anti-Christian attacks to justice and has promised to rebuild churches damaged in sectarian attacks during the Morsi era. He has also twice paid “surprise visits” to the cathedral to greet Christians during Orthodox Christmas Mass services. His words to the cathedral’s congregants in January 2015 when he declared, “We are all Egyptians in the first place” had moved some of the Christian faithful attending the service to tears.’⁶⁴

6.5.15 According to the 2016 USCIRF Report:

‘...Furthermore, in response to sectarian-related violence, local Egyptian authorities continue to conduct “customary reconciliation” sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes. In some cases, local authorities and Muslim and Christian religious leaders have abused these reconciliation sessions to compel victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. Human rights groups have argued that reconciliation sessions disadvantage Christians in resolving various disputes, many of which are sectarian-related attacks targeting Christians.’⁶⁵

6.5.16 According to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015:

‘Police failed to act in the face of victimization of Christians in Upper Egypt who were disproportionately targeted for kidnapping and extortion, according

⁶³ Al Monitor, What do Recent Attacks Mean for Future of Egypt's Christians? – July 2016 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/egypt-tensions-christians-copts-killings-sisi.html> Date accessed: 19 Sept 2016

⁶⁴ Al Monitor, What do Recent Attacks Mean for Future of Egypt's Christians? – July 2016 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/egypt-tensions-christians-copts-killings-sisi.html> Date accessed: 19 Sept 2016

⁶⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Coptic Christians, April 2016, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf Date accessed: 20 Sept 2016

to human rights activists and Christian leaders, although there were some reports of police successfully securing the release of kidnapped Christians.’

‘...In November 2015 a local human rights organisation 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 organisation said that local police failed to act in this case and more broadly in the face of kidnappings of Christians in parts of Qena.’

6.5.17 The same report also noted that:

‘On 8 August 2015, 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 26 January 2015 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 21 October 2015 and failed to pursue the kidnappers, according to an international rights organisation. The kidnappers released the child after his family paid 45,000 EGP (\$5,625).’⁶⁶

6.5.18 According to the Minority Rights Group International, in their 2016 Annual Report:

‘Copts, their properties and places of worship remain vulnerable to violent attacks. In January 2015, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders in Minya were forced to cancel Christmas celebrations after two policemen were gunned down while guarding a Coptic church. Later, during Holy Week in April 2015, Easter celebrations were accompanied by heightened sectarian violence in Minya governorate. Copts, their churches and homes in Nasreya were left poorly protected by security personnel – a common occurrence - when attacked by angry villagers after a Coptic teacher and students were accused of insulting Islam after a video was circulated in which they reportedly ridiculed ISIS. Many attacks against the community are enabled by the failure of security forces to provide adequate protection.’⁶⁷

6.5.19 According to Human Rights Watch, in their article, Egypt: New Church Law Discriminates Against Christians, September 2016:

‘Recent incidents of anti-Christian violence that left one person dead, several injured and numerous properties destroyed were prompted or preceded by

⁶⁶ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁶⁷ Minority Rights Group International, State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 – Egypt, 12 July 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=5796083a6&skip=0&query=Coptic%20christians&coi=EGY&searchin=title&sort=date> Date accessed: 19 Oct 2016

anger among some local Muslims over actual or alleged church construction. Even when authorities have made arrests, they have rarely prosecuted suspects, creating a climate of impunity for violent crimes that target Christians.’

‘President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi pledged to respect freedom of belief and made important visits to Coptic Christmas masses. Authorities, however, have failed to protect Coptic Christians from violent attacks and instead enforced “reconciliation” sessions with their Muslim neighbours that deprive them of their rights and allow attackers to evade justice. In some cases, Christians were obliged to leave their homes, villages or towns.’⁶⁸

[Back to Contents](#)

6.6 Reconciliation Committees

6.6.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts, considered Reconciliation Committees:

‘Reconciliation Committees, a form of traditional justice, have typically been used by authorities when tackling sectarian incidents, particularly in rural and poorer areas where vendettas are not uncommon. They are often seen by authorities as preferable to a judicial approach (as the outcome of Reconciliation Committees will likely prevent revenge attacks). Reconciliation Committees are not used solely for inter-religious disputes. In most cases, the Prosecutor-General will accept the outcome of Reconciliation Committees and close the relevant files. Reconciliation Committees will typically involve victims of crimes abandoning their claims to legal remedy, and instead accepting negotiated apologies and compensation being paid by one or both parties, with promises made to not repeat certain activities. DFAT understands that, sometimes, authorities will put pressure on victims to abandon criminal complaints and accept the outcome of Reconciliation Committees. On rare (and particularly serious) occasions, people are relocated to other parts of the area or country.’

‘...Reconciliation Committees are sometimes imposed on people by the police, who see them as more effective than proper investigations and prosecutions. Perpetrators of crimes committed as part of the tensions in question are rarely prosecuted. Credible contacts have reported to DFAT that, in the cases of Christian–Muslim Reconciliation Committees, though compensation might be received from state authorities or Muslim parties, it will rarely meet the damage caused during violence. Moreover, in those cases where one party is required to relocate, it is the Christian party that is generally moved. The Christian community is often offered protection from further attacks as a result of the Committee.’⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch, Egypt: New Church law discriminates against Christians, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians>, accessed on 18 Oct 2016

⁶⁹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, Reconciliation Committees, Paragraphs 5.1 – 5.3, 28 January 2014 Copy on request. Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

6.6.2 According to the Independent, in their article - Coptic Christians: Who are they – and why have then been targeted by ISIS?

‘The Copts were a vibrant – and secure – facet of Middle Eastern society but their position in Egypt has fluctuated with different rulers... Copts in Egypt claim they still suffer discrimination and persecution today. The violence and instability that has engulfed Egypt in the past few years has undoubtedly adversely affected already marginalised communities. ... There have also been infrequent examples of local Muslim communities accusing Copts of various offences and acting outside of the law. There has been little redress for these Copts, with many claiming authorities turned a blind eye to their complaints. Amnesty International's Egyptian Research Mohamed Elmessiry told The Independent that the discrimination is not in all parts of the country but it exists in some parts of the country. "For example," he continued, "where there is a big population of Muslim brotherhood supporters. There is discrimination from the public but it depends where exactly and there is discrimination from the government to reconciliation with Muslim families."

“We have documented cases when Copts were accused of insulting Islam and in these cases the Copts will be attacked by members of their villages and the government has done nothing,” he added.⁷⁰

[Back to Contents](#)

6.7 Judiciary

6.7.1 The DFAT 2015 Egypt report has stated that:

‘DFAT assesses that Copts are generally treated equally in the judicial system in relation to normal court proceedings. However, in cases involving personal status issues or the issue of defamation of religion, evidence supplied by Muslim witnesses may be granted more weight than that supplied by non-Muslim defendants or witnesses. The judiciary can be subject to community pressure. DFAT is aware that conservative Islamist lawyers and/or community leaders have demonstrated outside court rooms during a number of defamation cases in Upper Egypt in an attempt to influence the outcome. DFAT is not aware of a case where a judge has been harmed for making their decision.’⁷¹

[Back to Contents](#)

7. Societal attitudes and treatment

7.1 Discrimination and violence tensions

7.1.1 According to the 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts:

⁷⁰ The Independent, Coptic Christians: Who are they – and why have then been targeted by Isis? 16 February 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypts-coptic-christians-who-are-isis-latest-victims-and-why-are-they-persecuted-10048328.html> Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

⁷¹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, Other Considerations, Judiciary, Paragraphs 5.6 – 5.7, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

‘Communal tensions and violent incidents involving Copts steadily increased in recent decades, fuelled by growing Islamist sentiment; worsening economic conditions; and growing segregation along religious lines. The situation deteriorated after both the January 2011 Revolution, which overthrew President Mubarak, and the July 2013 military intervention, which overthrew President Morsi due largely to the breakdown of law and order on both occasions. Under the Sisi administration, however, there has been a significant decrease in the scale and number of attacks against Copts.’

‘...Notwithstanding the overall rise in the number of violent incidents in recent decades, including some high-profile attacks, DFAT assesses that day-to-day life for most Copts in Egypt is not overtly affected by communal tensions. Most Egyptians, especially those living in urban areas, work, live and socialise together with little regard to each other’s religious identity. However, small-scale disputes (such as neighbourhood disagreements) can adopt religious overtones and escalate into community-level violence. This is particularly the case in poorer rural and urban areas. Spikes in communal tensions can also coincide with broader political upheavals.’⁷²

7.1.2 The same report noted that:

‘In recent years, political and economic turmoil has led to a decrease in law and order and an increase in violent incidents, affecting all Egyptians. DFAT assesses that a weakening of law and order mechanisms in Egypt; a deterioration of economic conditions; and a long-term trend of increased Islamist sentiment (especially in poor and rural communities) have all contributed to an increase in the number of violent incidents involving Copts.’

‘...Most communal incidents in Egypt take the form of vandalism and destruction of property. High-profile incidents in which people are killed or churches attacked are not a daily occurrence. There are 7-9 million Copts living in Egypt, and the vast majority do not face communal violence in their daily lives. DFAT assesses that Copts are generally at a low risk of personal harm from communal violence, especially in middle class urban centres. However, this risk is higher in rural, poorer urban or more conservative areas, particularly in Upper Egypt. Incidents of violence across the country can spike in line with broader political upheavals.’⁷³

7.1.3 According to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015:

‘Lethal sectarian violence continued in 2015 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.... In

⁷² Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 2, Communal Tensions, Paragraphs 2.18 and – 2.20, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

⁷³ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, Other Considerations, Judiciary, Paragraphs 5.6 – 5.7, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

many cases, individuals charged with denigration of religion also faced societal violence or threats of violence, according to Christian leaders.’

7.1.4 The report also stated that:

‘While on duty, two Christian conscripts in their early twenties allegedly committed suicide on 24 June 2015 and 20 November 2015. 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.’

‘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 30 January 2015 and one on 23 February 2015, 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 12 February 2015.’

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

‘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.”’⁷⁴

7.1.5 According to Freedom House in their 2016 Annual Report:

‘Abuses against Copts continued in 2015, with numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction. Christians were also arrested on charges of proselytizing, and similar allegations against Shiites led to the closure of a charity and the arrest of an activist.’⁷⁵

7.1.6 According to Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), citing a range of sources:

‘Sources report that Copts experience "discrimination" (AI 2015; The Independent 18 Feb. 2015). An "Egypt Researcher" for AI, who was

⁷⁴ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 3 – Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom, April 2016

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁷⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2016 Egypt, Section B, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/egypt> Date accessed: 9 Sep 2016

interviewed by the Independent newspaper, stated that societal discrimination against Copts "exists in some parts of the country" such as in areas where there is a large population of Muslim Brotherhood supporters' (ibid.).

'...The Assistant Professor explained that "sectarian violence" is a problem occurring mostly among "regular Muslims and Copts," involving mob attacks on Coptic property, shops, and private homes, with the degree of violence ranging from damage and looting to arson and complete destruction of property, as well as verbal and/or physical assaults against individuals, sometimes leading to up to a "handful" of fatalities' (Assistant Professor 14 April 2015).

7.1.7 The Response continued that:

'Sources report that Copts have been the target of violence and threats in the following locations:

'Upper Egypt, particularly the governorates of Al Minya, Sohag (CSW 26 September 2014; Professor 17 April 2015; Assistant Professor 14 April 2015), and Asyut [Asiut] (ibid.; CSW 26 September 2014). Al-Monitor reports that sectarian problems have been "rampant" in Minya, particularly in the village of Delga' (Al-Monitor 24 April 2014).

'Areas of Cairo (Research Fellow 1 May 2015; Assistant Professor 14 April 2015) occupied by poor Coptic migrants arriving from Upper Egypt' (ibid.).

'North Sinai (Al-Monitor 7 January 2014; Assistant Professor 14 April 2015), where Copts have been targeted and "severely threatened" by militias swearing allegiance to Islamic State' (ibid.).

7.1.8 The Response also stated that:

'In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at University of Sussex, who has been researching Coptic issues since 1996, gave the view that "there is a constant unknown as to when a strike against [Copts] might occur and we cannot say that they are not always at risk even if they are not located in hotspots such as Upper Egypt" (Research Fellow 1 May 2015)...'⁷⁶

7.1.9 The 2016 USCIRF Report noted that:

'There has been progress on accountability for the destruction of and damage to Christian churches and properties in the summer of 2013. In April 2015, an Egyptian Court convicted and sentenced approximately 70 individuals to life in prison for their role in burning a church in the village of Kafr Hakim just outside Cairo. In December 2014, 40 perpetrators found responsible for attacks on five churches in Assiut, Upper Egypt, were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to 15 years. Other cases are

⁷⁶ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), 8 May 2015 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

ongoing but in some cases, police have not conducted adequate investigations, making it more difficult to prosecute perpetrators.’

‘...In addition, following the August 2013 church attacks, the number of incidents of kidnappings for ransom and extortion of Christians rose dramatically. While these incidents have decreased over the past year, they continue in parts of the country, particularly in Upper Egypt.’⁷⁷

- 7.1.10 The Telegraph, in their article - Hundreds of Egyptian Muslims Attack Christian Woman and Homes After Rumours About her Son – 26 May 2016 has stated that:

‘Hundreds of Muslims have set fire to homes of Christians in Southern Egypt and stripped a woman naked after rumours her Christian son had an affair with a Muslim woman, the local church and witnesses said. The Christian man fled with his wife and children on 19 May [2016] said Ishak Ibrahim at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. His parents went to the police, fearing for their lives. The next day, around 300 Muslim men set fire to and looted their house in the southern province of Minya and stripped the mother naked out on the street. They also set fire to and looted six other houses, witnesses told Reuters. ... President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi condemned the attack in a statement and ordered authorities to bring those behind it to justice. He also ordered local authorities and the military to rebuild all damaged properties within a month at state expense. ... Security sources said police arrested five men in connection with the incident and the Public Prosecutor had ordered their detention and the arrest of 18 others.’⁷⁸

- 7.1.11 According to NY Times, in their September 2016 article, Egypt’s Christians Say They Are at a ‘Breaking Point’

‘Once again, Egyptian Christians are feeling under siege, at least in Minya, a city on the banks of the Nile where about 40 percent of the population is Christian. And once again, Christian leaders are divided over how to respond. At the highest levels of the Coptic Orthodox Church, there is an effort to not make waves and to work with the central government to present an image of unity and calm. After a series of attacks on Copts in the summer, the Coptic pope, Tawadros II, pleaded with his followers in the United States not to go ahead with planned demonstrations outside the White House intended to bring international attention to the violence. ‘However, in Minya, where violence against Christians often flares, local Coptic leaders are reluctant to go along with this.’⁷⁹

⁷⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Coptic Christians, April 2016, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF 2016 Annual Report.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf) Date accessed: 20 Sep 2016

⁷⁸ The Telegraph, Hundreds of Egyptian Muslims Attack Christian Woman and Homes After Rumours About her Son, 26 May 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/26/hundreds-of-egyptian-muslims-attack-christian-woman-and-homes-af/> Date accessed: 20 Sep 2016

⁷⁹ NY Times, Middle East - Egypt’s Christians Say They Are at a ‘Breaking Point,’ 4 September 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/world/middleeast/egypt-middleeast-copts-christians.html?_r=1 Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

7.1.12 The article continued that:

‘Egypt’s Christian community has had a long symbiotic relationship with the state. The government provided security in an increasingly hostile environment, and the Christian leadership helped present a face of tolerance and religious freedom to the West...When Mr Sisi attended Coptic Christmas services in January 2015, he was cheered enthusiastically as the first Egyptian leader to do so. Yet, the limits of that support have become evident in Minya, where Christians continue to suffer violence and humiliation. Houses have been burned, Copts attacked on the streets and hate graffiti written on the walls of some churches. In all, Coptic officials have counted 37 attacks in the past three years, not including some 300 others right after Mr Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were ousted from power in 2013....’⁸⁰

7.1.13 According to Human Rights Watch, in their article, Egypt: New Church Law Discriminates Against Christians, September 2016:

‘Sectarian clashes have occurred with increasing frequency and intensity since the 2011 uprising. In the southern Minya governorate alone, the independent Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) has documented 77 such incidents since 25 January 2011. Minya, where Christians are an estimated one-third of the population, has also been the scene of violent anti-Christian attacks in recent months.’

‘...On 17 July 2016, a mob killed a young Christian man and wounded three others in Tahna al-Gabal after an argument that started between some Muslim and Coptic children escalated. Ishak Ibrahim, religious freedoms researcher with the EIPR, told the Daily News Egypt that the village had already been tense because of restorations to a church building. In late June and mid-July, mobs destroyed four Coptic homes in Kom al-Loufi and six buildings, including a nursery, in Abu Yacoub after Muslim neighbours claimed Christians planned to use the houses as churches.’

7.1.14 The Report continued that:

‘Mobs have attacked Christians recently in other cities and towns as well. Video from a village on the western outskirts of Alexandria aired on YouTube in June showed scores of people in the streets chanting, “We don’t want a church.” The mob assaulted Christians and attacked a building next to a church that the attackers claimed offered religious services. Another video that appeared in July showed a mob attacking Coptic buildings in al-Fashn, a village in Beni Suef governorate, north of Minya, after similar allegations that Christians were using a building for prayers.’

‘Though security forces arrested dozens of people following the sectarian attacks in Minya earlier this year, most were released without proper

⁸⁰ NY Times, Middle East - Egypt’s Christians Say They Are at a ‘Breaking Point,’ 4 September 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/world/middleeast/egypt-middleeast-copts-christians.html?_r=1
Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

investigation or prosecution. For example, police released 16 people accused of the attacks in Abu Yacoub after a “reconciliation” session.⁸¹

[Back to Contents](#)

7.2 Interfaith relationships

7.2.1 The BBC News, in their article, Egypt: The Forbidden Love of Interfaith Marriage noted that:

‘Interfaith marriages are increasingly unacceptable in Egypt and couples must be ready to pay a hefty price.... Religious leaders often see inter-faith marriage as an attempt to recruit members from the other religion. Religion is an incredibly sensitive issue in Egypt, with many Christians and Muslims refusing to accept people leaving their congregation.... Fr George Matta, Pastor of St George Church at Ezbet Hanna Ayoub in Menya, Upper Egypt, suggests that the culture in the Egyptian countryside does not accept interfaith relationships ... Last year, a Muslim man was killed and five others were injured in clashes that took place in a remote village in Menya province. During the same incident, five Christian houses were set on fire. The fighting erupted because of a relationship between a Muslim girl and a Christian neighbour.... Ahmed Attallah [an Egyptian writer who studies sectarian clashes] says that interfaith marriage has effectively become prohibited in Egypt. "When a Christian woman goes to a notary to register a marriage with a Muslim man, the officials tell her that she must have a letter of approval from the Church," he says. "The Egyptian Church has consistently refused to approve marriages between different Christian sects, let alone different religions." he adds.....⁸²

7.2.2 According to the U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015:

‘The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews and Muslims.... 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.’⁸³

7.2.3 The United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 for Egypt also noted that:

‘Laws affecting marriage and personal status generally related to an individual’s religious group. For example, a female Muslim citizen cannot

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, Egypt: New Church law discriminates against Christians, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians>, Date accessed: 18 Oct 2016

⁸² BBC News, Egypt: The Forbidden Love of Interfaith Marriages, 24 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29932094> Date accessed: 14 Sep 2016

⁸³ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Legal Framework, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 20 Sep 2016

legally marry a non-Muslim man. If she were to do so unofficially, she would face significant societal harassment. Under the government's interpretation of Islamic religious law, any children from such a marriage could be placed in the custody of a male Muslim guardian.⁸⁴

[Back to Contents](#)

7.3 Women

7.3.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts reported that:

'Coptic women are generally able to work and travel unaccompanied in most areas of Egypt. Some Coptic women have reported being harassed or discriminated against after being identified as Copts (for instance, for not having their hair covered). Such incidents are more likely to occur in rural and poorer areas, particularly in Upper Egypt. However, DFAT notes the relatively high levels of societal discrimination against all women in Egypt (including within the Coptic community), and the role that on-going traditional values and ideas about gender roles plays in such discrimination, which is distinct from any specific anti-Copt prejudice.'⁸⁵

7.3.2 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2014 has stated that:

'According to a local human rights organisation, police beat and arrested Christian residents of Gabal El-Teir village, township of Samalot, Minya Governorate and raided Christian-owned houses, after local Christians demonstrated at the Gabal El-Teir police station over the alleged kidnapping of a Coptic woman for forcible conversion to Islam. The protests became violent, with multiple reports of demonstrators throwing rocks at police and police firing gunshots into the air. The confrontation left three policemen injured and the windows of two police vehicles smashed, according to the MOI.'⁸⁶

7.3.3 According to Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), citing a range of sources:

'The Egyptian non-governmental organisation (NGO), Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced Disappearance, cited by the Christian Post, between January 2011 and March 2014, stated that 550 Coptic girls have been kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and forced to marry their captors. The same source indicates that 40 percent of the girls were raped prior to the conversions and marriages. The Research Fellow said that

⁸⁴ United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015, Section 6, Women: Discrimination, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253133.pdf>
Date accessed: 12 Sep 2016

⁸⁵ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3, Women, Paragraphs 3.42, 24 November 2015 Copy on request. Date accessed: 22 Sep 2016

⁸⁶ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

Coptic women who have been kidnapped have also been raped, in some cases by multiple perpetrators.⁸⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

7.4 Christian Converts

7.4.1 The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in a response of 27 November 2013, noted:

'In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, an independent journalist and publisher, who is also an activist for democracy and has previously served as the chairperson for the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), an NGO dedicated to monitoring human rights in the country, stated that 'converting to Christianity, or better still converting from Islam, is technically not possible. While the laws do not forbid or criminalize it in any way, there is no legal [a]venue for doing so. If an Egyptian Moslem converts to any other religion and tries to register the conversion, he will simply be denied that by any government official. It normally is left at that and no legal charges are made.' (Independent Journalist 10 November 2013)

'However, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, an Associate Professor of political and international studies at Trinity Western University who has researched Christian minorities in the Middle East for almost two decades, stated that "a convert to Christianity from Islam will have extreme difficulty dealing with officials and neighbours who have any idea of his or her decision" (Associate Professor 8 November 2013). The Associate Professor added that "Muslim converts to Christianity are regularly harassed by government officials who view their actions as a social offence against Islam tantamount to treason"' (Associate Professor 8 November 2013).

'Similarly, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a board member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada stated that authorities will attempt to dissuade someone from converting from Islam to Christianity and may arbitrarily imprison the person alongside "dangerous criminals" if they insist on converting.' (Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada 13 November 2013).⁸⁸

7.4.2 The U.S Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2015 stated that 'One Muslim family reportedly killed a family member for her alleged conversion to Christianity.'⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015), 8 May 2015 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁸⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Egypt: Whether people who have converted from Islam to Christianity, particularly those converts who have been arrested, are able to obtain passports and leave the country (April 2010-November 2013), 27 November 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52ce9aa64.html> Date accessed: 16 Sep 2016

⁸⁹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 2 – Government Practices, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf> Date accessed: 21 Sep 2016

8. Freedom of movement

- 8.1.1 The United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 for Egypt noted that: ‘The law provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights, albeit with some exceptions, including the handling of potential refugees and asylum seekers. The Civil Aviation Authority, in co-operation with the Ministry of Justice and Interior, maintained a “no-fly” list that prevented some defendants in court cases from fleeing the country...’⁹⁰
- 8.1.2 The 2015 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts noted:
‘There is no legal impediment to internal movement within Egypt, including for single women, and many Copts do relocate for a variety of reasons. Some Copts have internally relocated because of communal tension, either as a result of reconciliation committee decisions, or voluntarily. If means allow, families will usually help with finding shelter and financial assistance. The church will also sometimes assist.’
- 8.1.3 The same report noted that:
‘There is also a large movement of Copts to live in cities for economic reasons. Major cities, such as Cairo and Alexandria, offer Copts greater opportunities for employment, as they do for other Egyptians. Some Copts from the poorer parts of Upper Egypt have moved to the north coast of the country for better economic opportunities. DFAT assesses that urban middle class Coptic women will likely have a greater ability to find work and shelter than Coptic women from poor and more conservative areas, and will also likely have access to better support networks.’⁹¹
- 8.1.4 For information on freedom of movement generally, see the country policy and information note on [Egypt: Background Information including Actors of Protection and Internal Relocation](#).

⁹⁰ United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015, Section 2, Freedom of Movement, April 2016 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253133.pdf>
Date accessed: 19 Sep 2016

⁹¹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, 24 November 2015, Section 5, Internal Relocation, Paragraphs 5.13 – 5.15, 24 November 2015, Copy on request. Date accessed: 12 Oct 2016

Version control and contacts

Contacts

If you have any questions about this note and your line manager, senior caseworker or technical specialist cannot help you, or you think that this note has factual errors then [email the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

If you notice any formatting errors in this note (broken links, spelling mistakes and so on) or have any comments about the layout or navigability, you can [email the Guidance, Rules and Forms Team](#).

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **2.0**
- valid from **21 November 2016**

Changes from last version of this guidance

Updated country information

Guidance revised – general position remains the same, however given changes to country situation protection may be available in some cases.

[Back to Contents](#)