



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Egypt: Christians

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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

COI in this note has been researched in accordance with principles set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), namely taking into account its relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability.

All information is carefully selected from generally reliable, publicly accessible sources or is information that can be made publicly available. Full publication details of supporting documentation are provided in footnotes. Multiple sourcing is normally used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, and that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided. Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source is not an endorsement of it or any views expressed.

Feedback

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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:

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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/>

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Policy guidance

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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.

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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](#)).

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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 (around 7-14 million people). They are spread throughout the country but are 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 face societal discrimination and violence, including episodes of looting, bomb and arson attacks, blocking of church construction, kidnapping and mob violence. Discrimination and communal violence tends to be worse in rural areas and poorer urban or religiously conservative areas, with many incidents taking place in the province of Minya which has a large Christian population (see [Societal attitudes and treatment](#), specifically [Communal and societal violence](#)).

2.2.3 In the country guidance case of [MS \(Coptic Christians: Egypt CG \[2013\] UKUT 611 \(IAC\) \(3 December 2013\)](#), heard on 17 and 18 September 2013, the Upper Tribunal (UT) 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.

'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..

'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.

'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.

'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.' (Paragraphs 151 (2-6)).

2.2.5 Following the case of [MS](#), which relied on evidence up to the end of 2013, the political, security and social situation for Christians improved up to 2015. However during 2016 and early 2017 there has been an increase in non-state sectarian violence against Christians (see [State attitude and treatment](#) and [Societal attitudes and treatment](#)).

2.2.6 While some laws reportedly discriminate against Christians – Copts appear more likely to face prosecution and conviction for blasphemy than Muslims – the Al Sisi Government has sought to improve law and order, and has taken several highly visible steps towards bettering state relations with, and to provide support for, the Coptic community. Christians are not generally at

risk of persecution or serious harm from the state (see [Legal rights](#) and [State attitude and treatment](#)).

- 2.2.7 Christians continue, however, to face societal discrimination and some violence. The number and severity of violent incidents targeting Copts and their property has increased since 2015. This includes attacks by Daesh (aka Islamic State), which has stated its intent to target Christians and claimed responsibility for high profile bombings in Cairo, Alexandria and Tanta in December 2016 and April 2017 resulting in scores of casualties (see [Societal attitudes and treatment](#)).
- 2.2.8 Christians are in general not at risk of persecution or serious harm by non-state actors in urban areas, including in Cairo and Alexandria. However, Christians in some rural or poorer areas, particularly those with a strong extremist presence, 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 (see [State attitude and treatment](#) and [Societal attitudes and treatment](#)).
- 2.2.9 While Christians remain generally unlikely to be at risk of serious harm or persecution, each case will need to be considered on its merits with the onus on the person to demonstrate why they would be at risk.
- 2.2.10 For guidance on assessing risk see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#)

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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 of persecution is at the hands of non-state actors (including rogue state agents), decision makers must assess whether effective protection is available in relation to the particular circumstances and profile of the person.
- 2.3.3 In [MS](#), the Upper Tribunal found that there was inadequate state protection for Coptic Christians from other Egyptians (paragraph 151(1)). However, since [MS](#) was promulgated in 2014 there is evidence that the state has shown a greater willingness to protect Christians who have been targeted for violence by non state actors, including Daesh. Although a lack of success in preventing, investigating or prosecuting those responsible for violence against Copts continues to foster an atmosphere of impunity and undermined the state's ability to provide effective protection. The authorities also often use Reconciliation Committees to tackle sectarian incidents in communities, which are seen as a temporary solution and typically favour the local Muslim community (see [State protection](#)).
- 2.3.4 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.

2.3.5 For more information and guidance on protection within Egypt, see the country policy information and note on [Egypt: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).

2.3.6 For further guidance assessing the availability of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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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 (see [Freedom of Movement](#)).

2.4.2 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](#)).

2.4.3 In [MS](#) the UT 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).

2.4.4 For more information on relocation generally within Egypt, see the country policy information and note on [Egypt: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).

2.4.5 For further guidance on internal relocation and the factors to be considered, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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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 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#)

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3. Policy summary

3.1.1 While Christians may face discrimination they are not in general at risk of persecution or serious harm from the state.

3.1.2 Christians may 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 strong 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 individual cases which put a person at risk.

- 3.1.3 While existing caselaw based on events up to 2013 found that there is no effective state protection of Christians, the situation has since improved. There is evidence of the state being more willing to provide protection and may, in some cases, be 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 relocate from their home area, particularly to an area where extremists do not have a strong presence. Each case, however, will need to be considered on its specific facts and the person's individual circumstances.
- 3.1.5 Where a claim is refused it is unlikely to be certified as clearly unfounded.

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4. 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
- 4.1.2 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

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4.2 Christian community

- 4.2.1 The Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade report on Egypt (DFAT report), based on evidence gathered from a range of sources, released in May 2017 noted:

'Christianity has deep roots in Egypt, arriving approximately six centuries before Islam. Although there are twelve officially recognised Christian denominations in Egypt (four Orthodox, seven Catholic and one Protestant), the overwhelming majority of Christians in Egypt are members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. All those belonging to recognised Christian denominations are identified as Christian on their national ID cards. While Christians reside throughout the country, they are particularly concentrated in Upper Egypt (the southern part of Egypt) and in major cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Suburbs in Cairo, other cities and some villages are sometimes regarded or described as 'Christian areas', but few are exclusively Christian (or Muslim). The Christians are politically and socio-economically diverse: they hold varied professions; range from the very poor to the substantially rich; and have attained a range of education levels.

'Christians generally dress similarly to Muslim Egyptians. In urban areas, however, Christian women are more likely to leave their hair uncovered than are Muslim women. Christian women living in rural or conservative areas are more likely to cover their hair, but would not wear the Islamic hijab. Christians tend to have identifiable names. Though not a mandatory part of

¹ The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, The Coptic Network Encyclopaedia, last updated January 2006, <http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/>. Accessed: 5 September 2016

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

religious practice, Christians often have small crosses tattooed on the inside of their wrists or between their thumb and forefinger as a mark of their identity. Such tattoos are often obtained after Christians have visited monasteries or holy sites. It is unclear what percentage of the Christian community has such tattoos, or if the practice is increasing or decreasing.

‘As an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, Egyptian laws and long-standing practices are generally designed to safeguard the majority (although the Constitution preserves the rights of all Egyptians). There are no legal barriers to prevent Christians from attaining visibility in public life, and a number of Christians have become prominent and influential in Egyptian politics and business. DFAT understands that the percentage of Christians in the Egyptian civil service is broadly representative of the religious breakdown of the population. However, Christians tend to be under-represented in senior civil servant roles, and in the upper ranks of the military and security services. It is very rare for Christians to be appointed as presidents, deans or vice-deans in public universities. While anti-discriminatory laws and legal protections exist, these are not always enforced fairly and Christians may experience some discrimination, particularly in rural areas [...].’³

4.2.2 According to the Washington Times, in their article, *Libyan Gunmen Kidnap at least 20 Christians*, the kidnappers sought to identify the Christians by tattoos of crosses on their rights wrists, ‘a common mark worn by many Egyptian Christians.’⁴

4.2.3 The Encyclopaedia Britannica observed that:

‘Copts are far and away the largest Christian denomination in the country. In language, dress, and way of life they are indistinguishable from Muslim Egyptians; their church ritual and traditions, however, date from before the Arab conquest in the 7th century. Ever since it broke with the Eastern Church in the 5th century, the Coptic Orthodox Church has maintained its autonomy, and its beliefs and ritual have remained basically unchanged. The Copts have traditionally been associated with certain handicrafts and trades and, above all, with accountancy, banking, commerce, and the civil service; there are, however, rural communities that are wholly Coptic, as well as mixed Coptic-Muslim villages.’⁵

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4.3 Demography

4.3.1 According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report (USCIRF) 2017 on Egypt published in April 2017 and covering events in 2016:

³ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), ‘Country Information Report – Egypt’ (paras 3.29-3.31), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

⁴ Washington Times, *Libyan Gunmen Kidnap at least 20 Christians: ‘They Had a List of Full Names,’* 3 January 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/3/least-20-christians-kidnapped-gunmen-libya/>. Accessed: 7 March 2017

⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘Egypt’ (Religion), updated 2 May 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/Languages#toc43467>. Accessed 14 June 2017.

'Of the country's estimated 90 million people, 85 to 90 percent are Sunni Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than 1 percent. Ten to 15 percent are Christians, the vast majority belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church, and less than 2 percent belonging to various other denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and Anglican.'⁶

4.3.2 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

4.3.3 The DFAT thematic report on Egyptian Copts of November 2015 stated that:

'While Copts reside throughout the country, they are particularly concentrated in Upper Egypt (the southern part of Egypt) and in major cities 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.'⁸

4.3.4 The Encyclopaedia Britannica observed that:

'The Copts are most numerous in the middle Nile valley governorates of Asyūṭ, Al-Minyā, and Qinā. About one-fourth [around 2 million] of the total Coptic population [estimated to be around 7-9 million] lives in Cairo... Among other religious communities are Coptic Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox and Catholic, Maronite, and Syrian Catholic churches as well as Anglicans and other Protestants.'⁹

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⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Background, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 3 May 2017

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/>. Accessed: 5 September 2016

⁸ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Thematic Reports - Egyptian Copts' (paragraphs 2.3 and 2.14), 24 November 2015. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁹ Enclopaedia Britannica, 'Egypt' (Religion), updated 2 May 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/Languages#toc43467>. Accessed 14 June 2017.

5. Legal rights

5.1 Overview

- 5.1.1 According to the USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt ‘...discriminatory laws and policies that remain in place continue to negatively impact Christians, including the blasphemy law and limits on conversion from Islam. Egyptian-born Muslims who have converted to Christianity still cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases, these converts also face intense social hostility.’¹⁰

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5.2 Constitution

- 5.2.1 Article 2 of the [January 2014 Constitution](#) states that: ‘Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation.’¹¹

- 5.2.2 The DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts, 24 November 2015 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...but 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 January 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.’¹²

¹⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

¹¹ Constitution of The Arab Republic of Egypt 2014, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newvvr/Dustor-en001.pdf> Date accessed: 15 March 2017

¹² 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.. Accessed: 10 October 2016

- 5.2.3 According to the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report (USCIRF) 2016 on Egypt published in April 2016 and covering events in 2015:

‘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...’

‘...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.’¹³

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5.3 Blasphemy laws

- 5.3.1 The USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt 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

- 5.3.2 The Egyptian website Mada Masr referred to criticism of Egypt’s blasphemy laws by Human Rights Watch, which noted that they curtail freedom of expression, which is guaranteed by the Egyptian Constitution. Mada Masr stated that blasphemy laws are used against everyone, including Shia Muslims, atheists, Copts, and in some cases, Sunni Muslims. Mada Masr reported on some recent convictions for blasphemy, including a well-known Islamic TV preacher, Islam al-Beheiry, and also a poet and journalist, Fatima Naoot. The report did not specify the religious affiliation, if any, of Ms. Naoot.¹⁵

See also section on [Prosecution for blasphemy and defamation](#) for information on application of the law in practice.

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¹³ 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. Accessed: 21 September 2016

¹⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2017 Annual Report: Egypt, Background and Egypt’s Constitution, April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRF_Annual_Report.pdf. Accessed: 3 May 2017

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/>. Accessed: 10 October 2016

5.4 Conversion and proselytising laws

5.4.1 According to the USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt:

‘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.’¹⁶

5.4.2 The same USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt 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, according to a Ministry of Interior (MOI) decree pursuant to a court order. 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.’¹⁷

5.4.3 The DFAT report of May 2017 noted that:

‘There is no statutory prohibition in Egypt on converting from one religion to another. Muslim clerics encourage conversion to Islam from other religions. Converts to Islam will generally have their conversions recognised and their identity cards changed accordingly without difficulty or delay. However, courts and government officials have generally interpreted sharia as prohibiting conversion from Islam and have refused to recognise such conversions legally, including through failing to amend a convert’s national identity card (and corresponding record) to reflect their chosen faith. This has significant ramifications for personal status issues, such as marriage and divorce, and the state’s view of the religious identity of any children born to a convert. Egyptian children obtain a national identity card at age 16, with their religious identity matching that of their parents (their Muslim parent, in the case of a mixed marriage between a Muslim man and Christian woman).

¹⁶ 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>. Accessed: 14 September 2016

¹⁷ 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>. Accessed: 14 September 2016

Self-identified Christians designated as ‘Muslim’ on their identity cards will generally be unable to marry in a Christian ceremony. Any children born to such persons will almost certainly have ‘Muslim’ written on their identity card at age 16.’¹⁸

See [Converts to Christianity](#) and [Christian converts](#) below for information about state and societal treatment in practice.

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5.5 Anti-discrimination laws

5.5.1 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 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.’¹⁹

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5.6 Personal status laws

5.6.1 The DFAT report of May 2017 noted:

‘Religion is central to identity in Egypt. Religious institutions of the three recognised religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) have responsibility for personal status issues such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. For Muslims, personal status laws derived from sharia (Islamic law) are contained in legislation. Family Courts apply this legislation to Muslim couples, Muslims married to Christians, and married couples who belong to different Christian denominations [...]. For Christians and Jews, the religious authorities themselves adopt personal status rules, based on relevant

¹⁸ Australian Government, DFAT, ‘Country Information Report – Egypt’ (paras 3.5-3.9), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

¹⁹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3: Refugee Convention Claims, Paragraphs 3.4 and 3.5, 24 November 2015, Copy on request.. Accessed: 18 October 2016

religious doctrine. These rules are considered equivalent to administrative decisions, and are subject to review in Egyptian courts.

‘Egypt is a socially conservative country, and very few couples co-habit outside of marriage in both urban and rural areas. The state administers marriages between Muslims in accordance with sharia. Christians and Jews must seek marriage under their respective religious institutions before obtaining a marriage contract from the state. All marriages must be registered with the Ministry of Justice, which issues official marriage certificates. According to sharia as interpreted by Egyptian courts), a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman without her having to convert to Islam. A Muslim woman, however, can only marry a non-Muslim man if he converts to Islam. Some Christian denominations will reportedly marry Christians from different denominations without requiring one party to convert, but most, including the Coptic Orthodox Church, will generally only marry couples from the same denomination.

‘There is no civil marriage in Egypt, and all religious authorities are strongly opposed to the concept. All marriages of Egyptians abroad are recognised within Egypt only when they comply with Egyptian personal status laws. For instance, if a Muslim woman married a Christian man in a civil marriage abroad, it would not be recognised in Egypt. Likewise, Egypt would not recognise a civil marriage between a same-sex couples.’²⁰

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5.7 Construction and renovation of churches laws

5.7.1 The USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt, covering events in 2016 and January and February 2017, stated that:

‘In August 2016, in accordance with Article 235 of the Constitution, the Parliament passed—and in September 2016 President Sisi approved—a new law regulating the construction and renovation of churches... The Coptic Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican denominations publicly supported the law. While some domestic and international human rights groups criticized the law, Egyptian officials saw it as a necessary step to address longstanding concerns. As a consequence of the new law, in January 2017, Prime Minister Sherif Ismail formed a government committee to legalize numerous churches that remain unlicensed since the passage of the law.’²¹

5.7.2 The USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt noted that:

‘The new law helps streamline the process for approval, sets out procedures and timelines, and requires governors to act on applications within four months. Some Egyptian and international human rights groups found the law to be restrictive and discriminatory. For example, some groups have stated the law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no clear avenue to appeal; requires that churches be built “commensurate with” the

²⁰ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘Country Information Report – Egypt’ (paragraphs 3.2-3.4), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

²¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2017 Annual Report: Egypt, Background and Egypt’s Constitution, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf> . Accessed: 3 May 2017

number of Christians in the area; and contains provisions that allow authorities to deny construction permits if granting them would undermine “public safety.” Others continue to argue that there should be a unified law passed to govern all places of worship, rather than have separate regulations.’²²

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6. State treatment

6.1 State attitude

6.1.1 According to Freedom House in their 2017 Annual Report:

‘Coptic Christians, who account for some 10 percent of the population, are allocated 24 of the parliament’s 120 party-list seats. Thirty-six Christians were elected in 2015, and an additional three were appointed by the president, for a total of 39 Christians in the parliament. The party-list quotas also set aside small numbers of seats for workers and farmers, people under 35, people with disabilities, and Egyptians living abroad.’²³

6.1.2 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.’²⁴

6.1.3 A Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board information response dated 20 June 2017 compiled from a number of sources reported:

‘Amnesty International reports that religious minorities, “including Coptic Christians..., continued to face discriminatory restrictions in law and practice and inadequate protection from violence” (Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2017, 149). In contrast, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher affiliated with Belgium’s Fonds National de Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) who specialises in the situation of Coptic Christians in

²² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 3 May 2017

²³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017 Egypt, Section B, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/egypt>. Accessed: 9 September 2016

²⁴ 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>. Accessed: 19 October 2016

Cairo, stated that [translation] "in general, there is no systematic discrimination or persecution from authorities towards Copts" in Egypt (Researcher 11 May 2017). However, the same source added that [translation] "Egypt is a Muslim state," and as such the head of the state must be Muslim, and, for example, Coptic Christians cannot be deans of universities, they cannot occupy important positions in hospitals, and there are no Coptic Christians in the army or in the police (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source indicated that the treatment of Coptic Christians by the police, authorities and local Muslim populations varies by region and social class: the situation is more tense in regions with a higher number of Coptic Christians, such as the Delta Region or middle and high Egypt than in Cairo, but in Cairo, the treatment of Coptic Christians also depends on the neighbourhood (Researcher 11 May 2017). The same source added that poorer Coptic Christians face more discrimination than those who are wealthier (Researcher 11 May 2017).

'In an article based on a speech delivered at the "Coptic Solidarity Conference"[1] on 9 June 2016 and published on the website of the Brookings Institution, a "nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, D.C." (Brookings Institution n.d.a.), Sarah Yerkes, a former fellow of the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy and an international fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations (Brookings Institution n.d.b), states that "[p]resident [Sisi] has been outwardly supportive of Egyptian Copts" (Yerkes 20 June 2016)...

'However, Yerkes adds that "despite de jure protections, [Sisi] himself fails to acknowledge de facto discrimination against Copts. This is most evident in the disproportionately low level of Christian representation in government, particularly with the influential security establishment" (Yerkes, 20 June 2016). She further indicates that "[o]n paper, Egyptians enjoy 'absolute' freedom of religion, guaranteed by the 2014 constitution. But, the constitution also decrees Islam to be the state religion, and conversion to any religion other than Islam is prohibited" (Yerkes 20 June 2016). Similarly, in its 2017 Freedom in the World report for Egypt, Freedom House indicates that "the 2014 constitution made the right to freedom of religion 'absolute'," but adds that "little has changed in practice since the document's adoption" and that "[a]buses against Copts continued in 2016, adding to numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction in recent years" (Freedom House 2017). In contrast, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) states in its 2016 annual report that there has been a "significant decrease in the number and scale" of sectarian attacks against" Copts since 2014 (US 2 May 2016, 92).'²⁵

6.1.4 The USCIRF 2016 Report on Egypt stated that:

²⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Research Directorate, 'Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)', 20 June 2017, <http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457090>. Accessed: 20 June 2017.

'During the past year [2015], the government's efforts to combat extremism and terrorism have had a chilling impact on human rights and civil society activities in the country.

'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.'²⁶

- 6.1.5 However, in its report for Egypt covering events in 2016 and January and February 2017, the US CIRF downgraded its assessment of Egypt as 'country of concern' to being a Tier 2 country, i.e. of lesser concern, given improvements in the country situation. The report stated:

'Despite the government's widespread repression of human rights, religious freedom conditions improved in several areas over the past year. President Abdel Fattah Sisi consistently condemned sectarian attacks and pressed for assistance for victims and accountability for perpetrators, pushed for reform in religious discourse, and attended a Coptic Christmas Eve mass for the third consecutive year. In August [2016], the newly-seated parliament passed a long-awaited law on the construction and maintenance of churches and, by early 2017, the government completed rebuilding and restoring more than 50 churches destroyed by extremists in 2013. While sectarian attacks targeting Christians spiked, particularly in Upper Egypt and North Sinai, and a major suicide bombing occurred near St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, Egyptian courts made some progress in bringing to justice perpetrators of past attacks. In 2016, prosecutions, convictions, and imprisonment of Egyptian citizens for blasphemy and related charges

²⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2016 Annual Report: Egypt, Key Findings, April 2016, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_2016_Annual_Report.pdf. Accessed: 19 October 2016

decreased. Some discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict freedom of religion or belief remain in place, but public debates occurred in parliament and civil society on a range of religious freedom concerns. Based on these developments, while still deeply concerned by the deplorable human rights conditions in Egypt, USCIRF places Egypt on its Tier 2, as it did from 2002 to 2010. From 2011 to 2016, USCIRF had recommended that Egypt be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).²⁷

6.1.6 An example of President Al Sisi’s condemnation of sectarian attacks was reported in ahramonline in May 2016:

‘Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi called on officials to hold accountable the perpetrators of an attack by a Muslim mob on Christians in a village in Upper Egypt, according to a Thursday statement by his office.

‘El-Sisi urged the government to take "necessary measures to preserve public order, protect [citizens] and property within the rule of law."

‘The Friday assault in Minya's El-Karm village was sparked by rumours that a Christian man was having an illicit relationship with a Muslim woman. Interfaith pairings are considered taboo in most of the country.

‘Muslim villagers set ablaze seven Christian homes and assaulted the Christian man's elderly mother, parading her naked in public, the Coptic Orthodox Church said in a statement.

‘El-Sisi issued directives to the provincial governor to restore all damaged buildings in coordination with the Armed Forces within one month and at the government's expense...

‘The interior ministry said in a statement on Thursday that police arrested five men suspected of taking part in the attack, including a main perpetrator identified as Nazir Ishaq Ahmed.

‘The ministry added that security forces have continued their efforts to "restore security and order" in the village, while emphasising its "full keenness to protect the lives, property and honour of all citizens."²⁸

6.1.7 Regarding the same incident, ahramonline reported: ‘For the first time since the attack last week, El-Sisi spoke publicly about the incident in which several houses belonging to Christians were burned and a woman dragged naked in public..."We are all Egyptians who are equal in rights and duties. It is not appropriate that what happened be repeated. Whoever commits an offense will be held accountable," El-Sisi said.²⁹

²⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 3 May 2017

²⁸ Ahramonline, ‘Egypt's Sisi calls on officials to hold perpetrators of Minya's sectarian attack against Christians accountable’, 26 May 2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/217717/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-Sisi-calls-on-officials-to-hold-perpetrator.aspx>. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

²⁹ Ahramonline, ‘Egypt's Sisi tells Christian victim of sectarian attack “not to be angered”’, 30 May 2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/217923/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-Sisi-tells-Christian-woman-from-ElKarm-vill.aspx>. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

6.1.8 The DFAT report of May 2017 noted:

'Most Christians viewed the post-2011 Revolution ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood with considerable apprehension. They regarded the Morsi government's removal and the restoration of general law and order as a cause for relief, and strongly supported the ascendancy of Sisi to the presidency. Christian religious authorities have consistently expressed appreciation for Sisi's public calls for Egyptians to place national unity above religious differences. Sisi attended the main Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015, the first time a serving Egyptian leader had done so, and attended again in January 2016. Sisi also called personally on Pope Tawadros to express his condolences following the murders of 21 Egyptian Copts in Libya in February 2015. Following the December 2016 church bombing in Cairo, Sisi declared three days of national mourning, attended the funeral for victims and ordered the Armed Forces to repair quickly the damaged church. As noted in 'Security Situation', following the twin Palm Sunday bombings, Sisi declared a nation-wide state of emergency. Christians generally remain strong supporters of Sisi, although (like other Egyptians) their initial enthusiasm has waned due to the lack of economic improvement and ongoing social difficulties in Egypt, including the threat of terrorism.

'DFAT assesses that discrimination faced by Christians in Egypt is more likely to be societal than official in nature, and is likely to vary considerably according to geographic location. However, some Christians, particularly in rural areas, may face difficulty in obtaining justice through legal means. Christians are also less likely than Muslims to be able to achieve senior positions in institutions such as the civil service, military and security services, and universities, despite the lack of any official policy of discrimination against them.'³⁰

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6.2 Maspero incident, 2011

6.2.1 Human Rights Watch noted that on 9 October 2011, a peaceful Coptic protest took place outside of the Maspero state television headquarters in Downtown Cairo. The protest was in reaction to the burning of Mar Girgis Church in Marinab, Edfu on 30 September 2011. Military soldiers approached the predominantly Christian protest while wielding batons, while other soldiers fired guns into the air. Two armoured vehicles hurtled toward the protesters at a high speed, crushing several people, while a soldier on top of one of the vehicles shot at protesters.³¹

6.2.2 The number of people who were killed differs depending on the source, but according to Human Rights Watch, 'At the insistence of human rights lawyers working with the families of victims, forensic medical doctors from the health ministry conducted 24 autopsies on 10 October [2011], concluding

³⁰ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.32-3.33), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, Egypt: Don't Cover Up Military Killing of Copt Protesters, 25 October 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/25/egypt-dont-cover-military-killing-copt-protesters>. Accessed: 27 March 2017

in their preliminary reports that eight of the people had died of bullet wounds, two from blows to the head, and 13 from injuries and fractures caused by the vehicles.³²

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6.3 Prosecution for blasphemy and defamation

6.3.1 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.'³³

6.3.2 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.'³⁴

6.3.3 The United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 for Egypt noted: '[In 2015, the] local and international rights groups reported increased charges under the blasphemy law, primarily targeting Christians but also Atheists.'³⁵

6.3.4 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

³² Human Rights Watch, Egypt: Don't Cover Up Military Killing of Copt Protesters, 25 October 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/25/egypt-dont-cover-military-killing-copt-protesters>. Accessed: 27 March 2017

³³ 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/>. Accessed: 10 October 2016

³⁴ 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>. Accessed: 9 September 2016

³⁵ 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 September 2016

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 Fayeze, 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.’³⁶

6.3.5 The USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt stated that:

‘During [2016], the number of blasphemy cases decreased when compared to the previous year. While the majority of charges are leveled against Sunni Muslims, most of those sentenced by a court to prison terms for blasphemy have been Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and atheists. A conviction can result in a prison term up to five years and a fine. For example, in January 2016, Egyptian writer and poet Fatima Naoot was sentenced to three years in prison for “defaming Islam” for a Facebook post criticizing the ritual slaughtering of animals during a Muslim holiday. In November [2016], an appeals court reduced her punishment to a six-month suspended sentence.’³⁷

6.3.6 The USCIRF report also stated that:

‘In February 2016, four Coptic Christian teenagers were sentenced to five years in prison for blasphemy for making a short, private video mocking ISIS. They and their teacher had been arrested and charged in April 2015; the teacher was sentenced to three years in prison in a separate trial in

³⁶ 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. Accessed: 20 September 2016

³⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

December 2015 and was expelled from his village. In April 2016, the four youths fled Egypt and reportedly are seeking asylum in Switzerland.

'In November 2016, well-known television show host, Islam El-Beheiry, was released from prison by presidential pardon just before completing his sentence for "defaming religious symbols" for comments he made about Islam on his program. He had been sentenced to five years in prison in May 2015; in December 2015 the sentence was reduced on appeal to one year.

'In February 2017, Sunni Muslim cleric Mohamed Abdullah al-Nasr was sentenced to five years in prison for "contempt of religion" for questioning various interpretations of Qur'anic texts on Facebook; he remains in prison while an appeal is pending.'³⁸

6.3.7 The DAFT report of May 2017 noted:

'Before the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, defamation of religion cases were rare. The number and frequency of charges rose considerably under the Morsi government, and this trend has continued under the Sisi government. In January 2015, Sisi issued a decree permitting the government to ban any foreign publications deemed offensive to religion. Under the Sisi government, Article 98(f) has been used against an increasingly wide range of groups across the country, including atheists, Christians (including converts from Islam), and artists (see also 'Atheists'). The increased use of social media has reportedly been a contributing factor in the rise of such cases, as more people have had visibility of potentially controversial material.

'According to the US State Department, at least 20 individuals were prosecuted and eight individuals convicted in 2015 under Article 98(f). The exact numbers of those prosecuted in 2016 are unclear. However, some of the more high-profile recent arrests and prosecutions include... the sentencing of four Christian teenagers in Minya to between three and five years' imprisonment in March 2016 for a video mocking an Islamic State execution that included a pre-beheading prayer.

'DFAT understands that those accused of blasphemy rarely have an adequate right of defence and are generally convicted. Penalties include fines and/or imprisonment ranging from six months to five years. In some cases, families have reportedly had to leave their homes due to threats received because of defamation of religion cases. In June 2016, two Members of Parliament reportedly launched a movement to repeal Article 98(f) on the grounds that it violated the Constitution's articles on freedom of belief and did not fit within sharia.'³⁹

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³⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

³⁹ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.12-3.14), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

6.4 Converts to Christianity

- 6.4.1 See also [Conversion and proselytising laws](#) and for information about societal treatment, see [Christian converts](#).
- 6.4.2 The USSD IRF 2014 Report on Egypt has said that: ‘Only 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.’⁴⁰

- 6.4.3 The USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt noted that:

‘Prosecutors did not file charges against Bishoy Armia Boulous, a convert from Islam to Christianity previously known as Mohamed Hegazy, but repeatedly ordered his continued pretrial detention based on accusations that he denigrated Islam in a symposium in 2009. According to his lawyer, Boulous was being held illegally, having exceeded the maximum pretrial detention period of six months. Boulous was initially sentenced to five years in prison in 2013 for “illegally filming demonstrations to stir international public opinion against Egypt.”

‘In December 2014, the Appellate Court accepted Boulous’ appeal of his sentence on the illegal filming charge and reduced it to one year. During the appeal process, Boulous was released by order of the Appellate Court in July 2014 pending a decision on the appeal. Upon his release, police immediately rearrested Boulous based on accusations of denigration of Islam in 2009. On 12 May, the press carried a statement by Boulous’ lawyer that he had been physically beaten and verbally abused by prison officials because of his conversion to Christianity. The lawyer also told press that Boulous was denied a Bible and prescription glasses.

‘According to a human rights advocate, Boulous’ re-arrest and continued detention were due to his conversion to Christianity. Boulous was previously known for suing the 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.’⁴¹

- 6.4.4 According to Morning Star News, in their Article, Key Figure in Fight For Religious Freedom in Egypt Freed, Declares Return to Islam, 3 August 2016:

‘Hegazy, 34, left Islam when he was 16. He began to suffer persecution almost immediately, and in 2002 he was jailed and tortured by the Egyptian internal police, then known as the State Security Investigations services. On [2 August 2007], Hegazy filed a lawsuit to force the MOI to change the religious affiliation listed on his state-mandated national identification card from Muslim to Christian. Hegazy said in 2007 that he filed the case mainly

⁴⁰ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁴¹ 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>. Accessed: 21 September 2016

to protect his soon-to-be-born child from being forced to suffer the same persecution he experienced. In 2008 he lost the case, but never appealed the decision.

'In response to the lawsuit, some Islamic leaders in Egypt called for Hegazy' death, and he suffered through numerous attacks, including having his home set on fire by a group of militant Muslims. Eventually he was forced into hiding. In 2011, when the "Arab Spring" revolution started in Egypt, Hegazy was able to come out of hiding, convinced that he could enjoy relative anonymity in the chaos that ensued through out the country. Hegazy tried to make a living as a freelance journalist during this time. He could also occasionally be seen on Christian talks shows broadcast by satellite into Egypt, raising his public profile even higher. For some Christians, especially converts in Egypt, he became a symbol of a sort.'⁴²

6.4.5 The USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt observed 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 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.'⁴³

6.4.6 OpenDemocracy in their article, 'Persecution Lurks for Converts from Islam in Egypt', 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 conver[t]s and atheists in limbo over 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

⁴² Morning Star News, Key Figure in Fight For Religious Freedom in Egypt Freed, Declares Return to Islam, 3 August 2016, <http://morningstarnews.org/2016/08/key-figure-in-fight-for-religious-freedom-in-egypt-freed-declares-return-to-islam/>. Accessed: 16 March 2017

⁴³ 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>. Accessed: 21 September 2016

practice, discrimination is a lurking threat for non-Muslims, Atheists and Shia.⁴⁴

6.4.7 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.'⁴⁵

6.4.8 The response went on to state, citing other sources, that:

'...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)⁴⁶

6.4.9 According to the USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt:

'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, 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].'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁴⁵ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁴⁶ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁴⁷ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Section 3 –

6.4.10 The DFAT report of May 2017 noted that:

'A 2011 court ruling allowed Christians who converted to Islam and then back to Christianity (generally to more easily access divorce) to amend their identity cards to reflect their chosen faith. However, DFAT understands that only a small number of such persons have actually been permitted to do so, and that several thousand others are waiting to have their cards changed back.

'Converts from Islam to other religions are not generally subject to officially sanctioned violence, detention or surveillance. However, they face significant societal discrimination in the form of rejection, ostracism and sometimes violence from their families or communities. Such discrimination is worse in poorer or rural areas, where values that are more conservative are tightly held. The level of discrimination is greater if the convert undertakes activities, such as proselytising, in relation to their conversion... DFAT assesses that a person converting from Islam faces a moderate risk of official discrimination. They are unlikely to have their new religious identity officially recognised and reflected on their national identity cards, which has ramifications both for their own personal status and for that of their children.'⁴⁸

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6.5 Construction and renovation of churches laws in practice

See also [Construction and renovation of churches laws](#).

6.5.1 The USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt 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 government had announced the army would rebuild destroyed churches at its expense.'⁴⁹

6.5.2 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

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom, April 2016, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

⁴⁸ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.5-3.9), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁴⁹ 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>. Accessed: 21 September 2016

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.’⁵⁰

6.5.3 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.”

‘... 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.’⁵¹

⁵⁰ 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/>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

⁵¹ 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>.

6.5.4 The article also opined that ‘Such restrictions amount to discrimination on the grounds of religion, imposed on Christians without justification.’⁵²

6.5.5 Associated Press in their Article, Egypt's New Law on Churches Angers Christian Critics, of August 2016 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 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.’⁵³

6.5.6 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.’⁵⁴

6.5.7 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] 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.”’⁵⁵

6.5.8 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

Accessed: 18 October 2016

⁵² 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: 18 October 2016

⁵³ 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>. Accessed: 2 November 2016

⁵⁴ 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>. Accessed: 2 November 2016

⁵⁵ 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>. Accessed: 2 November 2016

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.’⁵⁶

6.5.9 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 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.’⁵⁷

6.5.10 According to the New York 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

⁵⁶ 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. Accessed: 22 September 2016

⁵⁷ 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>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

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.”’⁵⁸

6.5.11 The USCIRF report covering events in 2016 and January and February 2017 observed that:

‘During the year [2016], Christian leaders lauded President Sisi’s ongoing active engagement with the community, including his attendance for the third consecutive year at a Coptic Christmas Eve mass at St. Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo. During that visit, President Sisi announced that the government would build the largest church and mosque in the country in the new administrative capital, New Cairo, by 2018. In addition, by early 2017, the government had completed rebuilding and repairing 56 churches that were destroyed or damaged by extremist attacks in the summer of 2013 following former President Morsi’s ouster.’⁵⁹

6.5.12 The DAFT report of May 2017 noted:

‘In August 2016, the Parliament passed Law 80/2016 required by Article 235 of the Constitution to Christians to build and renovate churches. Church building is one of the most sensitive communal issues in Egypt -a leading human rights NGO has stated that it is the source of around 20 per cent of clashes between Muslims and Christians. It has traditionally been extremely difficult to build a new church in Egypt, as local authorities have imposed convoluted processes to request permission and then ultimately refused the building permit. In contrast, there are minimal restrictions to building a mosque. There are reportedly approximately 2,800 registered churches throughout Egypt, compared to nearly 110,000 mosques.

‘Under the new law, Christians wishing to build a new church are still required to apply to the provincial governor for a building permit. The Christian community was divided over the new law in the lead-up to the vote. Many Christian politicians and activists spoke out against the law, claiming it only enshrined the existing bureaucratic hurdles used to prevent church construction, and that it codified discrimination against Christians. While initially critical, the Coptic Church ultimately spoke out in favour of the law after the Pope met with the Prime Minister, and many Christian MPs voted in

⁵⁸ 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. Accessed: 12 October 2016

⁵⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt (Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Christians), April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

favour of the law. However, there remains significant concern both within the Christian community and in civil society about how the new law will operate in practice, and whether it will actually make it easier for Christians to build new churches.

'DFAT assesses that Christians are subject to official discrimination in relation to the building and restoration of their places of worship as they continue to face restrictions in doing so that do not apply to Muslims.'⁶⁰

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6.6 State protection

6.6.1 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.'⁶¹

6.6.2 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.'⁶²

6.6.3 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:

'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

⁶⁰ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.15-3.18), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁶¹ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, State Protection, Paragraphs 5.1- 5.3, 24 November 2015 Copy on request.. Accessed: 22 September 2016

⁶² Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 5, State Protection, Paragraph 5.4, 24 November 2015 Copy on request.. Accessed: 22 September 2016

"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.).⁶³

6.6.4 The USSD IRF 2015 on Egypt 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.'⁶⁴

6.6.5 The report added that:

'The government failed to respond to or prevent sectarian violence in some cases, in particular outside of major cities, according to rights advocates. Government officials frequently participated in informal "reconciliation sessions" to address incidents of sectarian violence and tension, saying such sessions prevented further violence. Such sessions, however, regularly led to outcomes unfavourable to minority parties, and precluded recourse to the judicial system in most cases, according to human rights groups.

'...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

⁶³ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁶⁴ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Government Practices, April 2016, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf>. Accessed: 19 September 2016

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.⁶⁵

6.6.6 The USCIRF 2016 Report on Egypt 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 ongoing but in some cases, police have not conducted adequate investigations, making it more difficult to prosecute perpetrators.’⁶⁶

6.6.7 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)⁶⁷

6.6.8 The USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt 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.’⁶⁸

6.6.9 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

⁶⁵ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁶⁶ 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. Accessed: 20 September 2016

⁶⁷ UN, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined seventeenth to twenty-second periodic reports of Egypt*, 6 January 2016, Paragraph 21, http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1465551784_q1600175.pdf. Accessed: 2 November 2016

⁶⁸ 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>. Accessed: 21 September 2016

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).⁶⁹

6.6.10 The USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt 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.'⁷⁰

6.6.11 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.

'...Some government entities used anti-Shia, anti-Bahai, and anti-atheist rhetoric, and the government regularly failed to condemn anti-Semitic commentary. Actions of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – seen by Christian leaders as positive signals that Christians are full members of Egyptian society – included calls for imams and scholars to promote tolerant Islamic teachings [and] a visit to the main Coptic Orthodox cathedral on Christmas Eve...'⁷¹

6.6.12 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 escalated since the Arab Spring. In recent weeks and months, there has been a marked increase in religiously motivated violence...'⁷²

⁶⁹ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁷⁰ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Executive Summary, April 2016, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf>. Accessed: 19 September 2016

⁷¹ United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2015 Egypt, Executive Summary and Government Practices, April 2016, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256475.pdf>. Accessed: 19 September 2016

⁷² 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->

6.6.13 The article 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.⁷³

6.6.14 According to the Egypt Independent, in their Article, Egypt Drops Case Against Mob That Attacked Christian Woman, 16 January 2017:

'Egyptian prosecutors have thrown out a case brought by an elderly Christian woman against several members of a Muslim mob who stripped off her clothes and paraded her naked through the streets... Another case against the alleged perpetrators of the violence, which also targeted Christian homes, remains ongoing... At the time of the attack, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi called for the culprits to be held accountable and gave the military a month to restore property damaged during the violence, at no cost to the owners. A presidential statement issued then praised the role of "glorious Egyptian women" and said "the rights and the protection of their dignity are a humanitarian and patriotic commitment before being a legal and constitutional one."⁷⁴

6.6.15 According to the USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt:

'Police failed to act in the face of victimization of Christians in Upper Egypt who were disproportionately targeted for kidnapping and extortion, according to human rights activists and Christian leaders, although there were some reports of police successfully securing the release of kidnapped Christians.

'In November [2015] a local human rights organisation stated that unknown assailants kidnapped a Christian man from Al-Manah, Qena, detained him

[sisi.html](#). Accessed: 19 September 2016

⁷³ 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>. Accessed: 19 September 2016

⁷⁴ Egypt Independent, Egypt Drops Case Against Mob That Attacked Christian Woman, 16 January 2017, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-drops-case-against-mob-attacked-christian-woman>. Accessed: 15 March 2017

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.'⁷⁵

6.6.16 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).'⁷⁶

6.6.17 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.'⁷⁷

6.6.18 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 anger among some local Muslims over actual or alleged church construction. Even when authorities have made arrests, they have rarely prosecuted

⁷⁵ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁷⁶ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁷⁷ 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>. Accessed: 19 October 2016

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.'⁷⁸

6.6.19 According to the USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt: 'During the year [2016], progress continued on bringing to account perpetrators of past attacks targeting individuals or property on the basis of religion or belief. Over the past few years, dozens of perpetrators were convicted for destroying Christian places of worship and other religious structures during the summer of 2013.'⁷⁹ The same report observed that:

'While the government has made some progress on accountability for some sectarian attacks, other perpetrators of sectarian-related violence continue to go unpunished, which continues to foster an atmosphere of impunity. Furthermore, in some cases, instead of pursuing justice through the rule of law, local Egyptian authorities, particularly in Upper Egypt, continue to conduct "customary reconciliation" sessions between Muslims and Christians.

'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. For example, some Christian families have been forced to leave their village and sell their property as a consequence of the reconciliation session.'⁸⁰

6.6.20 DFAT in its May 2017 report observed that:

'Egyptian leaders are sensitive to the impact of communal violence. President Sisi has repeatedly denounced attempts to create rifts among Egyptians and called for national unity, most recently in relation to displacement of Christians from northern Sinai. However, lower-level Church officials have questioned the commitment of local officials and law enforcement to upholding the law equally for Christians and Muslims.

'DFAT assesses that while Egyptian authorities are generally committed to preventing communal violence, this commitment may vary between individuals and locations.'⁸¹

⁷⁸ 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 October 2016

⁷⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 'Annual Report 2017', Egypt (Positive Developments), April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

⁸⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

⁸¹ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.23-3.24), 19 May

6.7 Reconciliation committees

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

'... 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.⁸²

6.7.2 DFAT observed in its May 2017 report that:

'Reconciliation committees are a form of traditional justice that authorities use frequently to resolve communal incidents between Muslims and Christians. The reconciliation committee process typically involves victims of crimes accepting a negotiated apology and compensation and abandoning any claim to legal remedy. Authorities have often seen the application of reconciliation committees as being more likely to resolve issues and prevent revenge attacks and vendettas, particularly in rural and poorer areas such as Upper Egypt. Authorities often pressure victims of crimes to abandon criminal complaints and accept the outcome of reconciliation committees. In most cases, the Prosecutor-General will accept the outcome of reconciliation committees and close the relevant legal files.

'In the majority of cases involving violence by Muslims against Christians, the compensation offered by the state authorities or the Muslim parties is insufficient to meet the cost of the damage caused. In serious cases where one party is required to relocate to avoid ongoing violence, the Christian party is the one generally moved. Christian religious authorities are strongly opposed to the practice of reconciliation committees, arguing that the practice undermines the protection of the power of the law for all Egyptians. They have consistently called on state authorities to intervene to ensure that judicial processes are followed, but with limited success.

'DFAT assesses that Christians involved in communal violence with Muslims are unlikely to receive a fair outcome through a reconciliation committee process. However, the negotiated settlement of the reconciliation committee process may provide some guarantee against future violence.'⁸³

2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁸² The Independent, Coptic Christians: Who are they – and why have they been targeted by Isis? 16 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypts-coptic-christians-who-are-isiss-latest-victims-and-why-are-they-persecuted-10048328.html>. Accessed: 19 September 2016

⁸³ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 5.21-5.23), 19 May

6.7.3 An information responses compiled from a range of sources by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada stated:

'Mada Masr reports that, according to the [Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights] EIPR, there have been "45 sectarian incidents [that] ended with customary reconciliation sessions in the last five years" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). Regarding conciliation sessions to address disputes over church construction, the same source cites a religious freedoms researcher at the EIPR as stating that reconciliation sessions "result in Copts losing their rights, as they are forced to comply with the demands of the majority, who are Muslim citizens opposed to holding prayers or the construction of churches, demands that are illegal and unconstitutional" (Mada Masr 14 Apr. 2017). The article published in As Safir indicates that the Church came to reject reconciliation sessions because

'["it effectively prevents the state from enforcing the rule of law through the police and judicial system. Reconciliation sessions might well be useful to follow up on and reinforce a court's decisions in a community, but they can never replace a formal judicial process.]" (As Safir 25 Apr. 2017)

'In a speech delivered on 9 June 2016 at the Seventh Annual Coptic Solidarity Conference in Washington, DC, Dr. Daniel Mark, a commissioner for the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) similarly stated that

'["Local Egyptian authorities continue to conduct 'customary reconciliation' sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes rather than seeking justice through the courts. In some cases, local authorities and religious leaders have abused these reconciliation sessions to compel victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. The fact of the matter is that reconciliation sessions often disadvantage Christians in resolving various disputes, many of which are sectarian related attacks targeting Christians. (Mark 9 Aug. 2016).]"⁸⁴

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6.8 Judiciary

6.8.1 The 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Egyptian Copts 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

2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁸⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC), Research Directorate, 'Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)', 20 June 2017, <http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457090>. Accessed: 20 June 2017.

influence the outcome. DFAT is not aware of a case where a judge has been harmed for making their decision.⁸⁵

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7. Societal attitudes and treatment

7.1 Communal and societal violence

7.1.1 The DFAT report of May 2017 observed that:

‘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 on occasion adopt religious overtones and escalate into community-level violence, particularly in poorer and rural areas. 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 frequent occurrence.

‘The majority of incidences of communal violence in recent years have taken place in the provinces of Upper Egypt. The province of Minya – which has a sizeable (approximately 40 per cent) and relatively assertive Christian population, high concentration of Islamists, high rate of poverty, and low rate of education – has been particularly notable in this regard. According to the National Council of Human Rights, around ten incidents of communal violence occur each month in Minya.

‘A general breakdown in law and order nation-wide following the 2011 Revolution contributed to a significant growth in communal violence that peaked in the period leading up to and immediately following the July 2013 military intervention, and again in the aftermath of the August 2013 dispersals of pro-Morsi protests in Cairo. On these occasions, Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters attacked Christian targets across the country, including churches, schools, and private property. Most, but not all, of the incidents were marked by a slow police response, which may have been in part the result of police and security personnel being otherwise engaged in protecting government institutions. Large-scale anti-Christian violence ended with the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency and curfew in August 2013, combined with a security crackdown on protest activity by Brotherhood supporters.

‘A November 2014 government report into the anti-Christian violence found that 29 people had died in communal-related killings, 52 churches had been completely razed, another 12 damaged, and numerous Christian-owned properties destroyed. In December 2014, 40 perpetrators found responsible for attacks on churches in Upper Egypt received prison terms ranging from one to 15 years. The US State Department reported in 2015 that, under a specific presidential order, the military had completed the rebuilding

⁸⁵ 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.. Accessed: 12 October 2016

of around one-third of the churches and other buildings destroyed in the 2013 violence.⁸⁶

7.1.2 According to the USCIRF 2017 Report on Egypt '... while the number of incidents of kidnappings for ransom and extortion of Christians have decreased in recent years, they continue in parts of the country, particularly in Upper Egypt.'⁸⁷

7.1.3 The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC) in an information response of 20 June 2017 compiled from a range of sources stated:

'Middle East Eye states that since 2011 "dozens of instances of inter-communal tension and violence" were reported (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2017). The same source indicates that there were cases where relationships between Muslim women and Christian men "were considered a matter of dishonour sometimes leading to disputes and even violence," and that "[t]he building of new churches has also been at the centre of sectarian strife" (Middle East Eye 16 Nov. 2016). Similarly, France24 indicates that the construction of churches "has long been a contentious issue in Egypt and is often the source of sectarian violence" (France24 16 Sept. 2016).'⁸⁸

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7.2 Events in 2015

7.2.1 According to the USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt:

'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 many cases, individuals charged with denigration of religion also faced societal violence or threats of violence, according to Christian leaders.'⁸⁹

7.2.2 The report also stated that:

'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

⁸⁶ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.19-3.21), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

⁸⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2017, Egypt, April 2017, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

⁸⁸ IRBC, Research Directorate, 'Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)' (2.2 Incidents of Violence in 2016 and 2017), 20 June 2017, <http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457090>. Accessed: 20 June 2017.

⁸⁹ 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>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

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 a 26 April 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.'" ⁹⁰

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

'...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) ⁹¹

7.2.4 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.).⁹²

7.2.5 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

⁹⁰ 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>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

⁹¹ 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>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

⁹² 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>. Accessed: 12 September 2016

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)...⁹³

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7.3 Events in 2016

7.3.1 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 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.'⁹⁴ 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.'⁹⁵

7.3.2 According to the USCIRF 2016 Report on Egypt:

'Over the past year [2015/6], 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.'⁹⁶

7.3.3 The Economist, in their Article, Crimes and No Punishment, 18 April 2016 has stated that:

'Pope Tawadros has staunchly supported Mr Sisi, whom he once referred to as a "saviour" and "hero". But Christians are growing disenchanted with Mr Sisi's lack of progress. "We were expecting it to be much better," says Magdi Kemal Habib of Minya, who nevertheless backs the President. The church's

⁹³ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

⁹⁴ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Parliament Passes Controversial Law, 7 September 2016, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/09/07/news/3245/article.htm>. Accessed: 3 November 2016

⁹⁵ 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>. Accessed: 3 November 2016

⁹⁶ 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). Accessed: 12 September 2016

leader in Minya is more critical. “He just gives good feelings, but these feelings need to be translated into actions,” says Bishop Makarios.⁹⁷

7.3.4 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....’⁹⁸

7.3.5 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 70 year old 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.’⁹⁹

7.3.6 According to New York 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

⁹⁷ The Economist, Crimes and No Punishment, 18 April 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21705365-violence-only-one-problems-faced-christians-egypt-crimes-and-no>. Accessed: 15 March 2017

⁹⁸ 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. Accessed: 12 October 2016

⁹⁹ 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/>. Accessed: 20 September 2016

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. ‘...But, in Minya, where violence against Christians often flares, local Coptic leaders are reluctant to go along.’¹⁰⁰ 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.’¹⁰¹

7.3.7 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 investigation or prosecution. For example, police released 16 people accused of the attacks in Abu Yacoub after a “reconciliation” session.’¹⁰²

7.3.8 Guardian, in their article, Egypt: Three Days of Mourning Declared After 25 People Killed in Cairo Bomb, 11 December 2016:

‘Egypt has declared three days of mourning on...after a bombing at a chapel adjacent to Egypt’s main Coptic Christian cathedral killed 25 people and

¹⁰⁰ 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. Accessed: 12 October 2016

¹⁰¹ 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: 18 October 2016

¹⁰² 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: 18 October 2016

wounded another 49. Egypt's state-run news agency Mena reported that 12 kilograms of TNT explosives were used in the attack. The majority of those killed were women and children. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

'In a statement, President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi encouraged Muslims and Coptic Christians to band together "to emerge victorious in the war against terrorism, which is the battle of all Egyptians". He stressed that the government would be harsh in its response to the attack, one of the deadliest carried out against the religious minority in recent years.

'As the death toll rose and nearby hospitals called for blood donations, there was grief and anger in the streets. Hundreds of people crowded outside the cathedral, including a large crowd of young men who made clear their complaints against conservative Muslim groups, Egypt's MOI and even the President...

'The Egyptian Government has staked its mandate on the fight against Islamist groups as well as the Sinai chapter of Islamic State. Protecting the minority Christian population is the cornerstone of this pledge, but the attack caused some to question whether the government is living up to its promise to provide security to all Egyptians.'¹⁰³

7.3.9 The USCIRF report covering 2016 and January and February 2017 observed that:

'Despite notable progress in other areas, the number of violent attacks targeting Christians and their property, particularly in Upper Egypt, increased when compared to [2015]... For example, in May in Minya, a mob stripped naked a 70-year-old Christian woman, Soad Thabet, and dragged her through the streets after her son was accused of a relationship with a Muslim woman. In addition, mobs burned several Christian homes. Three men initially were arrested and charged, but were released in January 2017. Following an appeal, prosecutors reopened the case in February and reinstated charges against the three men; the case is ongoing. President Sisi expressed his sympathies in person to Ms. Thabet after her ordeal. In June, a mob assaulted Coptic families in Minya and burned Christian homes and a Christian preschool after rumors spread that they intended to convert the school into a church. In November 2016, a 2,000-member Coptic community in Sohag petitioned to build a church, angering some in the Muslim community. Local residents destroyed and looted Coptic Christian property, injured at least four Christians, cut off water and power supplies, and erected roadblocks to prevent fire trucks from entering the village. Eighteen individuals reportedly were arrested; the case is ongoing.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ The Guardian, Egypt: Three Days of Mourning Declared After 25 People Killed in Cairo Bomb, 11 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/11/egypt-bomb-blast-cairo-cathedral>. Accessed: 16 March 2017

¹⁰⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 'Annual Report 2017', Egypt (Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Christians), April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

7.3.10 The same source observed that ‘while the number of incidents of kidnappings for ransom and extortion of Christians have decreased in recent years, they continue in parts of the country, particularly in Upper Egypt.’¹⁰⁵

7.3.11 According to Freedom House in their 2017 Annual Report, covering events in 2016:

‘Abuses against Copts continued in 2016, adding to numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church construction in recent years. One of the worst incidents occurred in May [2016], when a mob of Muslim men in Minya looted and burned the homes of several Christian families and stripped a Christian woman whose son they accused of having an affair with a Muslim woman. IS claimed responsibility for a December [2016] church bombing in Cairo that killed 25 people. Separately, in November [2016], a Shiite man was allegedly abducted by security forces after he submitted a request to travel to Iraq for a religious pilgrimage.’¹⁰⁶

7.3.12 The DFAT report of May 2017 observed that:

‘Incidents of communal violence continued in 2016. Many of the incidents took place in Minya, including physical assaults of Christians and looting and destruction of Christian property. In May 2016, an elderly Christian woman was stripped and assaulted by a 300-strong mob angered by rumours that her son was in a relationship with a divorced Muslim woman. In July 2016, eight men involved in the incident were released and ordered to pay a fine.’¹⁰⁷

7.3.13 The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC) in an information response of 20 June 2017 compiled from a range of sources described a number of incidents of communal / sectarian violence against Christians in 2016, largely reported by Egyptian and international media organisations.¹⁰⁸

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7.4 Events in early 2017

7.4.1 The DFAT report of May 2017 observed that:

‘Around 154 Christian families fled the northern Sinai town of al-Arish after seven Coptic Christians were reportedly killed by Islamic State-affiliated militants in January-February 2017... Occasional violent incidents of communal violence are likely to continue to occur, especially in Upper Egypt and in Minya in particular. Most cases are likely to be the result of small-scale localised disputes that take on a religious dimension.’¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ USCIRF, ‘Annual Report 2017’, Egypt (Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Christians), April 2017, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed: 4 May 2017

¹⁰⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017 Egypt, Section B, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/egypt>. Accessed: 3 May 2017

¹⁰⁷ Australian Government, DFAT, ‘Country Information Report – Egypt’ (paras 3.22), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

¹⁰⁸ IRBC, Research Directorate, ‘Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)’, 20 June 2017, <http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457090>. Accessed: 20 June 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Australian Government, DFAT, ‘Country Information Report – Egypt’ (paras 3.22 and 3.24), 19

7.4.2 Human Rights Watch reported on the ‘suicide bombings at two Egyptian churches on April 9, 2017, that killed at least 45 people’. The article went on to note that

‘The attacks during Palm Sunday services in Tanta and Alexandria, claimed by the extremist group Islamic State (also known as ISIS), were the worst day of violence targeting Christians in Egypt’s modern history. In response, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi declared a nationwide state of emergency...

‘In Tanta, a city in the Nile Delta 95 kilometers north of Cairo, a man wearing concealed explosives managed to pass through a security check outside St. George’s Church and detonate himself near the front pews, killing at least 28 people and wounding 77, according to media reports. In Alexandria, church security camera footage showed another bomber trying to enter St. Mark’s Church through an open gate and being directed toward a metal detector guarded by police officers. When an officer stopped the man, he detonated his explosives, killing at least 17 people and wounding 48.

‘Pope Tawadros II, the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, was inside St. Mark’s Church but was not harmed, according to the Interior Ministry.

‘... Coptic Christians in Egypt have faced escalating threats since a December 11, 2016, ISIS suicide bombing at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, which killed at least 25 people and wounded 49. At least seven Coptic Christians in North Sinai, the stronghold of Egypt’s ISIS affiliate, were killed in the following months, prompting the majority of Coptic residents in al-Arish, the area’s biggest town, to flee to mainland Egypt. On February 19, 2017, in a video claiming responsibility for the Cairo cathedral bombing, ISIS threatened further attacks on Christians, accusing them of being “the spearhead of the crusader project to fight God’s religion in Egypt.”¹¹⁰

7.4.3 A special briefing of April 2017 on Palm Sunday bombings by ‘Eshad’ and Egypt Security Watch, research ‘projects’ under the US-based Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, provided further detail and analysis of the bombings in the context of ongoing sectarian violence. The briefing covering webpage observed that:

‘Twin bombs at Coptic Orthodox cathedrals in Alexandria and Tanta exploded on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017, killing 47 and injuring up to 113. The Islamic State in Egypt claimed the attack, which occurred less than five months after the bombing at St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church, an attack that left 28 dead and was also claimed by the group. The Alexandria attack targeted St. Mark’s Cathedral, the traditional seat of Christianity in Egypt where Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II was leading worship; he was uninjured in the blast.

‘Sectarianism is a longstanding problem in Egypt, and the past several months have proven more deadly than usual due to increasing sectarian

May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, ‘Egypt: Horrific Palm Sunday Bombings’, 12 April 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/12/egypt-horrific-palm-sunday-bombings>. Date accessed 8 May 2017.

terrorist violence. This year so far, 60 have been killed in sectarian violence both by the Islamic State in Egypt as well as other non-state and non-affiliated perpetrators, including the murders of six Christians in separate incidents in Alexandria, Assiut, Cairo, and Menoufia; the killing of seven Christians in a spate of incidents in North Sinai, leading Christians to flee the city in large numbers; and the twin bombings on April 9 [2017].¹¹¹

7.4.4 The BBC reported that Daesh (Islamic State) claimed responsibility for an attack on a bus carrying Coptic Christians ‘that killed at least 29 people and wounded about 25 others’ on 26 May 2017. The attack took place in Minya province as the ‘bus was making its way to the Monastery of St Samuel the Confessor, 135km (85 miles) south of Cairo’. In response, ‘Egyptian aircraft struck "terrorist training camps" in neighbouring Libya in retaliation for the attack.’¹¹²

7.4.5 The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC) in an information response of 20 June 2017 compiled from a range of sources described a number of incidents of communal / sectarian violence against Christians in 2016, largely reported by Egyptian and international media organisations.¹¹³

7.4.6 For further reports of sectarian violence targeting Christians see:

- ecoi.net
- [refworld](http://refworld.org)

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7.5 Interfaith relationships

7.5.1 The BBC News, in their Article, Egypt: The Forbidden Love of Interfaith Marriage noted that:

‘Interfaith marriages are increasingly unacceptable in Egypt; couples must be ready to pay a hefty price.... Religion is an incredibly sensitive issue in Egypt, with many Christians and Muslims refusing to accept people leaving their congregation. Religious leaders often see inter-faith marriage as an attempt to recruit members from the other religion. 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

¹¹¹ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, Special Briefing, ‘47 Killed in Bombings in Two Cathedrals in Tanta and Alexandria’, 21 April 2017, <https://timep.org/special-reports/special-briefing-palm-sunday-bombings/>. Date accessed 10 May 2017.

¹¹² BBC News, ‘Egypt Coptic Christians: IS claims attack’, 27 May 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40070612>. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

¹¹³ IRBC, Research Directorate, ‘Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; availability of state protection (2016-May 2017)’, 20 June 2017, <http://irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457090>. Accessed: 20 June 2017.

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.¹¹⁴

7.5.2 According to the USIRF 2015 Report on Egypt:

'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 [Christians or Jews] 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.'¹¹⁵

7.5.3 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 corresponded to an individual's religious group. For example, a female Muslim citizen cannot 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.'¹¹⁶

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7.6 Women

7.6.1 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.'¹¹⁷

7.6.2 The USIRF 2014 Report on Egypt 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

¹¹⁴ BBC News, Egypt: The Forbidden Love of Interfaith Marriages, 24 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29932094>. Accessed: 14 September 2016

¹¹⁵ 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>. Accessed: 20 September 2016

¹¹⁶ 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 September 2016

¹¹⁷ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Thematic Reports, Egyptian Copts, Section 3, Women, Paragraph 3.42, 24 November 2015 Copy on request.. Accessed: 22 September 2016

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.¹¹⁸

- 7.6.3 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, 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 Coptic women who have been kidnapped have also been raped, in some cases by multiple perpetrators.’¹¹⁹

- 7.6.4 For the information about women generally see, country policy and information note, [Egypt: Women](#).

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7.7 Christian Converts

- 7.7.1 For information about the law on conversion, see [Conversion and proselytising laws](#), and state treatment, see [Converts to Christianity](#).

- 7.7.2 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

¹¹⁸ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

¹¹⁹ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

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).¹²⁰

7.7.3 The USSD IRF 2015 Report on Egypt stated that: 'One Muslim family reportedly killed a family member for her alleged conversion to Christianity.'¹²¹ The USCIRF report covering events in 2016 and in January and February 2017 observed that: 'Egyptian-born Muslims who have converted to Christianity still cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases, these converts also face intense social hostility.'¹²²

7.7.4 The DFAT report of May 2017 noted that:

'[Christian converts]... face significant societal discrimination in the form of rejection, ostracism and sometimes violence from their families or communities. Such discrimination is worse in poorer or rural areas, where values that are more conservative are tightly held. The level of discrimination is greater if the convert undertakes activities, such as proselytising, in relation to their conversion.

'DFAT is aware of anecdotal reports of Christian women and girls being abducted and forcibly converted to Islam. Such reports have occasionally led to increased tensions and clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, particularly when the alleged abductions involve family members of Christian priests. However, there is little evidence to suggest that forced conversions occur as a regular phenomenon. DFAT assesses that most religious conversions in Egypt occur either to enable a person to marry someone from another faith, or to access divorce... DFAT assesses that a person converting from Islam faces a high risk of societal discrimination in the form of rejection, ostracism and possible violence from their families and communities.'¹²³

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¹²⁰ 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>. Accessed: 16 September 2016

¹²¹ 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>. Accessed: 21 September 2016

¹²² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 'Annual Report 2017', Egypt (Progress and Ongoing Challenges for Christians), April 2017, http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf. Accessed: 4 May 2017

¹²³ Australian Government, DFAT, 'Country Information Report – Egypt' (paras 3.5-3.9), 19 May 2017. Copy on request. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

8. Freedom of movement

- 8.1.1 The United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2016 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 authorities maintained a “no-fly” list that prevented some defendants in court cases from fleeing the country.’¹²⁴
- 8.1.2 The 2015 DFAT 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.’¹²⁵
- 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.’¹²⁶
- 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](#).

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¹²⁴ USSD, ‘Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2016’, Egypt (section 2d), March 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=265494>. Accessed: 14 June 2017.

¹²⁵ 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.. Accessed: 12 October 2016

¹²⁶ 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.. Accessed: 12 October 2016

Version control and contacts

Contacts

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Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

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Updated country information

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