



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)  
LEGAL AID BOARD

## **Egypt - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Tuesday 9 & Wednesday 10 August 2016**

### **Information on Coptic Christians including: location; available safe areas; treatment of nationwide/Cairo; available state protection; representation in government/parliament**

A publication released in May 2015 by the *United Kingdom Home Office* points out that:

“Religious minorities generally live dispersed throughout Egypt. For instance, there are suburbs in Cairo, other cities and some villages that are known to be ‘Coptic’ areas, but few are exclusively Coptic” (United Kingdom Home Office (May 2015) *Egypt: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation*, p.8).

In October 2015 the *Aid to the Church in Need* states:

“The undefined terms of Egypt's laws on religious freedom have made it easier to discriminate against vulnerable minorities. However Coptic Christians remain optimistic that President Sisi's tolerant attitude will continue to better the situation for non-Muslims in Egypt” *Aid to the Church in Need* (13 October 2015) *Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2013-2015 - Egypt country profile and incident reports*).

The *United States Department of State* in October 2015 notes that:

“Sectarian violence throughout the country declined during the year. Christians in Upper Egypt, however, were targeted for kidnapping and extortion disproportionately. Building and re-building churches in the absence of anticipated legislation was sometimes met with societal resistance, occasionally turning violent” *United States Department of State* (14 October 2015) *2014 Report on International Religious Freedom – Egypt*).

This document also notes:

“The government failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes targeting members of religious minority groups, which fostered a climate of impunity. The government failed to protect Christians targeted by kidnappings and extortion, and there were reports that security and police officials sometimes failed to respond to these crimes, especially in Upper Egypt” (ibid).

It is also pointed out in this report that:

“Christians continued to be underrepresented relative to their population in senior government positions” (ibid).

In January 2016 the *United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* notes in a report 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...” (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (6 January 2016) *Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Concluding observations on the combined seventeenth to twenty-second periodic reports of Egypt*).

*Open Doors International* in January 2016 states:

“The large Coptic minority, while facing important difficulties, has been tolerated because of its historical presence and its demographic size. In recent years, this has changed, however, causing historical Christian communities to be targeted as well. There is a small but growing community of Christian converts (Muslim Background Believers, MBBs), who bear the brunt of persecution, most often from family members” (Open Doors International (13 January 2016) *World Watch List 2016: Persecution Dynamics – Egypt*).

This document also states that:

“Regarding the community sphere, Copts are often victims of social exclusion. Field researchers report that Christians face constant discrimination in areas such as justice, education, basic social services and are generally more vulnerable to poverty” (ibid)

In 2016 the *Bertelsmann Foundation* states that:

“The Christian (mostly Coptic) minority, which makes up about 7% of the population, is underrepresented in the public sector” (Bertelsmann Foundation (2016) *BTI 2016; Egypt Country Report, 2016*, p.24).

This report also notes:

“...growing sectarian tension between Muslims and Christians” (ibid, p.24).

A report issued in 2016 by *Freedom House* commenting on events of the preceding year states:

“Coptic Christians, who account for some 10 percent of the population, are allocated 24 of the parliament’s 120 party-list seats, and the 2015 election results indicate that their representation is almost entirely dependent on this quota system. The Coptic Church leadership has allied itself with President Sisi since the coup, apparently to ensure the security of its constituents” (Freedom House (2016) *Egypt, Freedom in the World 2016*).

This document also states that:

“Abuses against Copts continued in 2015, with numerous cases of forced displacement, physical assaults, bomb and arson attacks, and blocking of church

construction. Christians were also arrested on charges of proselytizing, and similar allegations against Shiites led to the closure of a charity and the arrest of an activist” (ibid).

In April 2016 the *United States Department of State* commenting on events of 2015 notes that:

“There were incidents of mob violence and vigilantism, particularly sectarian violence against Coptic Egyptians” (United States Department of State (13 April 2016) *2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Egypt*).

In April 2016 *World Watch Monitor* comments on

“...numerous cases of Copts targeted for extortion, with rescue efforts often hampered by police inadequacies or unwillingness” (World Watch Monitor (21 April 2016) *Copt teenager kidnapped for ransom in Upper Egypt - Ongoing 'phenomenon' targets hundreds of Egyptian Christians*).

A document published in May 2016 by the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* points out that:

“Perhaps the most encouraging trend over the past two years has been the significant decrease in the number and scale of targeted, sectarian attacks against Copts. Since the violent assault on Copts and their churches and properties in August 2013, dozens of perpetrators have been prosecuted and imprisoned” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2 May 2016) *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2016: Egypt*).

This report also states:

“President al-Sisi was the first head of state to attend a Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015. He did so again in January 2016, publicly apologizing that authorities had not yet finished rebuilding churches destroyed in August 2013 and pledging to complete the process within a year. Following the unprecedented scale of violence against Copts that summer, the Egyptian government found that 29 people died in sectarian-related killings, 52 churches were completely destroyed, another 12 damaged, and numerous Christian-owned properties were destroyed. At the end of the reporting period, at least half of the destroyed churches had been rebuilt and the other half were still being constructed or repaired” (ibid).

It is also noted in this document that:

“While the Coptic community in general welcomes these and other symbolic gestures, repressive laws and discriminatory policies against Copts remain in place, including blasphemy charges and convictions, limits on building and maintaining churches, and limits on conversion from Islam. There also continues to be inadequate accountability for past violent attacks; most perpetrators from large-scale incidents that occurred between 2011 and 2013 – and even before that – have not been prosecuted. The inability to successfully prosecute those responsible for past violence against Copts and other religious minorities has continued to foster an atmosphere of impunity” (ibid).

A report released in May 2016 by *Reuters* notes:

“Sectarian attacks occur so frequently in Egypt that they rarely attract wide publicity” (Reuters (30 May 2016) *In Egyptian village, attack on Christian grandmother fuels anger*).

This document also points out that:

“Sectarian violence often erupts on the back of rumors about inter-faith romances or suspicions that Christians are building churches without the required official permission. Homes are burned, crops are razed, churches are attacked and, occasionally, Copts are forced to leave their villages, say human rights groups and residents of the southern province of Minya, home to Egypt's largest Christian community” (ibid).

The *Brookings Institute* in June 2016 states:

Last month in Minya, Egypt, a 70-year-old Christian woman was beaten and dragged through the streets naked by a mob because her son was suspected of having an affair with a Muslim woman. Horrors like these have renewed fears of religious discord in Egypt. President Abdel-Fatah el-Sissi and his government regularly describe Egypt as unified and have worked hard—publicly—to reduce Muslim-Christian tension. But the Minya event has once again demonstrated the relative impunity of the Egyptian police, who failed to respond to earlier warnings of a violent, religiously-motivated attack and took hours to appear on the scene” (Brookings Institute (20 June 2016) *What Egypt under Sissi is really like for Coptic Christians*).

In June 2016 the *European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance* notes that:

“Over the 2014-2015 reporting period, sectarian attacks decreased, but the government failed to adequately protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians” (European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (30 June 2016) *Annual Report on the State of Freedom of Religion or Belief in the World 2015 [Egypt excerpt]*).

In July 2016 the *Society for Threatened Peoples* states in a report that:

“For fear of violent protests by Islamic extremists, the authorities have so far mostly refused to grant building permits for churches. In September 2016, the Parliament will finally adopt a new law to regulate the construction and renovation of churches, guaranteeing religious freedom for Christians living in the country” (Society for Threatened Peoples (1 July 2016) *Christian minority in Egypt in distress*).

A document released in July 2016 by *Reuters* notes that:

“Orthodox Copts make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 90 million people and are the Middle East's biggest Christian community. They have long complained of discrimination” (Reuters (2 July 2016) *Islamic State militants kill Coptic Orthodox priest in Egypt's North Sinai*).

A report issued in July 2016 by *Minority Rights Group International* notes that:

“...elections in 2014 handed Sisi a landslide victory...Sisi's rule has itself been characterized by authoritarianism and widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture and forced disappearances, particularly of perceived supporters of the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood...throughout the year the government continued to restrict the beliefs and practices of many minorities...the risk of targeted violence against religious minorities from other Egyptians...remains high. Sisi's draconian policies have done little to resolve the underlying problem of inter-communal conflict and have arguably deepened divisions within Egyptian society. This lack of progress is reflected in the situation of Egypt's sizeable Coptic Christian minority, long victims of discrimination and persecution, who to some extent have benefited from recent political reforms under Sisi. For example, Egypt's national elections in October 2015 saw Coptic Christians win 36 parliamentary seats, 6 per cent 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...Yet...Coptic Egyptians remain marginalized by state institutions and face ongoing risks of sectarian violence. 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...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” (Minority Rights Group International (12 July 2016) *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 [Egypt excerpt]*).

This document also notes that:

“Copts, their properties and places of worship also 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, 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” (ibid).

In July 2016 the *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights* states:

“The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights is extremely concerned with the increasing frequency of sectarian violence in the Minya governorate, which has been the scene of attacks and the burning of Copts' homes in several towns” (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (18 July 2016) *EIPR warns of increasing sectarian attacks in Minya governorate and urges state institutions to enforce the law and initiate social dialogue on the church construction law*).

The *Associated Press* in July 2016 notes:

“A Muslim mob in southern Egypt stabbed a Coptic Christian to death over a personal feud, officials said Monday, stoking anger among Christians amid a spike in assaults on their community” (Associated Press (18 July 2016) *Muslim mob stabs Christian to death in Egypt over feud*).

This document also states:

“Christians make up 10 percent of Egypt's mostly Muslim population. Sectarian violence occasionally erupts, mainly in rural communities in the south. Islamic extremists have also targeted Christians” (ibid).

A report issued in July 2016 by *World Watch Monitor* states that:

“Since May 2016, Egypt's Christians have suffered multiple attacks” (World Watch Monitor (20 July 2016) *Seven weeks see a dozen incidents against Egypt's Copts*).

*Ahram Online* in July 2016 comments on:

“...a recent series of violent sectarian attacks in the country's south” (Ahram Online (21 July 2016) *Egypt's President Sisi vows to hold violators to account after recent sectarian violence*).

*World Watch Monitor* in July 2016 notes:

“Eight Christian homes were attacked and an equal number of Copts were detained after Muslims in an Egyptian village went on a rampage following rumours of a house church being built” (World Watch Monitor (27 July 2016) *Copts attacked, forced to settle for nothing, in absence of Egyptian justice*).

A report issued by the *Agence France Presse* in July 2016 notes:

“Egypt's Copts, the Middle East's largest Christian minority, have long struggled to obtain official permission to build churches. They are now hoping a new law on building houses of worship -- both mosques and churches -- will curb discrimination against them. But here in the rural southern province of Minya, even the rumour of Christians building a church can spark mob violence. Copts have faced growing violence in recent years. Dozens have been killed in sectarian attacks across the country” (Agence France Presse (28 July 2016) *Egypt Christians look to new law to end discrimination*).

A document published by the *Financial Times* in August 2016 states:

“Egypt's Coptic Christians — or Copts — who make up an estimated tenth of the country's population, hoped that longstanding discrimination against their community would recede after President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ousted his Islamist predecessor in 2013. Mr Sisi delighted Egypt's Christians by visiting Cairo cathedral during Christmas mass. But the Copts have grown more critical of the failure of the Sisi government to stop attacks against their community and ensure that the perpetrators face justice” (Financial Times (2 August 2016) *Egypt's Christians lose patience with Sisi as attacks spike*).

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

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