

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained largely static. Radical Islamist violence and anti-Christian mob attacks remained serious threats but occurred less frequently than in prior years. Despite some improvements, systematic and ongoing religious inequalities remained affixed in the Egyptian state and society, as various forms of religious bigotry and discrimination continued to plague the country’s Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

In terms of positive trends, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and other officials continued to call for religious inclusivity, albeit less prominently than in the prior two years, including again [attending](#) Coptic Orthodox Christmas Mass in January. The Cabinet committee for approving registration of churches and church-related buildings [approved](#) 388 such preexisting properties in 2020—a significant decline from 785 in 2019 and 627 in 2018. It has now approved 1,800 of the 5,515 applications received (32.6 percent) since the passage of Law 80/2016, commonly known as the Church Building Law. Several high-profile court cases resulted in the conviction of perpetrators of religiously motivated violence, including the June conviction and sentencing to 15 years in prison of seven individuals for the 2013 burning of a church in Giza. A Court of Appeals ruling in May [affirmed](#) the right of Christians to follow their own tradition of inheritance distribution, including gender equality. With the permission and often direct support of the Egyptian government, local and international initiatives furthered efforts to revitalize some non-Muslim religious heritage sites, including the completion of a project to [restore](#) the Basatin Cemetery in Cairo, one of the world’s oldest Jewish burial sites.

Nevertheless, Egyptian authorities continued to perpetrate or tolerate various forms of systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. Blasphemy cases continued to disproportionately impact non-Muslims as well as Muslims whose beliefs the state perceived as outside officially accepted interpretations of

Sunni Islam. Religious discrimination remained pervasive, including a disparity in policies regarding places of worship, a lack of opportunities for non-Muslims to work in key areas of government service, state security harassment of former Muslims, and recurring incidents of anti-Christian mob violence, particularly in rural areas. For example, reports in 2020 pointed to the [exclusion](#) of non-Muslims from the roster of Egypt’s national soccer team, while the Coptic community continued to raise [longstanding concerns](#) regarding the potential targeting of Christian women by radical Islamists for abduction and forcible conversion. In December, attackers in Alexandria [stabbed](#) one Christian to death and injured two others in what was likely a sectarian incident. Anti-Coptic violence in the Minya towns of Dabous and Barsha in October and November, respectively, illustrated Egypt’s ongoing impunity for sectarian violence, as each incident concluded with a so-called “customary reconciliation council” that absolved the attackers of responsibility.

The Egyptian government continued to fall short in balancing domestic security, protection of citizens’ fundamental rights, and [economic development](#), despite a nearly 3 percent [decline](#) in poverty in 2020. Security forces continued to struggle with combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in North Sinai as its self-proclaimed “Sinai Province” [carried out](#) operations against government forces and civilians, including the November [kidnapping](#) of a Coptic man in Bir al-Abd. Although 2020 saw few incidents of radical Islamist violence elsewhere in the country, the government continued to use counterterrorism as a [pretense](#) to repress journalists, human rights and religious freedom advocates, and other members of civil society—even prosecuting some resulting cases through a terrorism court. Such actions directly contradict the government’s assurances that it is working to improve conditions for civil society, including its [passage](#) of a revised version of the Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Law in 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Egyptian government to 1) take concrete steps toward phasing out the long-standing use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of sectarian mob violence, 2) repeal decrees banning Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, 3) remove religion from official identity documents, 4) pass laws consistent with article 53 of Egypt’s constitution; and 5) repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and in the interim limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail;
- Encourage Egypt to expedite approval of church registrations under Law 80 of 2016;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance to programs supporting efforts to promote greater religious inclusivity throughout the country as well as to reform public school curriculum and teacher training; and
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and require the State Department to provide explicit justification for the release of any previously withheld Foreign Military Financing (FMF), including public disclosure of justification for its certification of Egypt’s progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Egypt’s Detention of Mohamed Basheer, Ramy Kamel](#)

Background

Egypt's constitution identifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of Shari'a as the primary source of legislation. While Article 64 states that "freedom of belief is absolute," only Muslims, Christians, and Jews can practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Of the country's estimated 104 million people, [around 90 percent](#) are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi'a Muslims, comprise less than 1 percent. An estimated 10 percent are Christians, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; other Christians belong to various denominations that include Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and others. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 20 Jews.

Legal and Security Repression

Egypt's evolving [crackdown](#) on civil society demonstrated the overlapping interests of religious freedom and broader human rights. In November, security forces [detained](#) Mohamed Basheer, Karim Ennarah, and Gasser Abdelrazek, three members of the NGO the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). While authorities released them three days later, after an international [outcry](#), prosecutors submitted their case to a terrorism court, which [ordered the seizure](#) of their personal assets. These arrests were likely in retaliation for EIPR's discussion of issues facing Egyptian civil society with a [visiting delegation](#) of diplomats from the European Union and Canada in October, echoing Coptic activist [Ramy Kamel's](#) November 2019 arrest and indefinite detention one day before he was expected to travel to Switzerland to testify at the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. Both EIPR and Kamel have devoted significant emphasis in their advocacy to the challenges facing [Coptic Christians](#) and [other religious minorities](#) in Egypt. Their detentions, along with that of EIPR researcher [Patrick Zaki](#) earlier in the year, demonstrate a systematic and ongoing effort by the government to suppress any challenge to its narrative of progress and its efforts to bolster its international image—even against those whose work addresses the same challenges the government itself [ostensibly recognizes](#).

At the same time, a [recent USCIRF report](#) has shown that implementation of Egypt's blasphemy law—Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code—made it one of the world's worst offenders of both blasphemy-related prosecutions and societal violence between 2014 and 2018. Such [arrests and prosecutions](#) continued in 2020; they involved both Muslims and non-Muslims, but they most often targeted religious minorities, including Christians, nonbelievers, Qur'anists, and Shi'a Muslims. For example, in June an Alexandria court [sentenced](#) Anas Hassan to three years in prison for managing a Facebook page that

promoted atheism, while Reda Abdel Rahman, a teacher at al-Azhar Institute in Sharqiya governorate, was [detained](#) in August for promoting Qur'anism.

Rural Sectarianism

Anti-Christian mob attacks remain endemic in parts of rural Egypt. Although 2020 saw a modest decline in incidents in comparison to prior years, the decrease may have resulted from the [months-long closures](#) of houses of worship throughout Egypt to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Nevertheless, legal impunity for the perpetrators of such violence persisted in 2020 as the systematic norm. These sorts of attacks most commonly occur in response to a rumor of a perceived slight against the Muslim majority—such as an interreligious affair, a social media post perceived as insulting Islam, or an attempt to register an informal church legally—and they are almost always met with the convening of a "customary reconciliation council" that ultimately absolves the perpetrators of legal responsibility and punishes the victims. For example, in September the Minya Criminal Court [convicted](#) 23 defendants in absentia for burning several Coptic homes in 2016 following rumors of an interreligious affair—a rare prosecution, likely due to the notoriety of the attack, which also involved the sexual assault of an elderly Coptic woman—but the terms of a last-minute reconciliation agreement led to the [acquittal](#) of three of the attackers.

Key U.S. Policy

[Bilateral relations](#) between the United States and Egypt remained steady in 2020—a partnership that has weathered countless challenges since the Camp David Accords of 1979. U.S. financial assistance, mostly in the form of FMF, remained largely consistent at \$1.38 billion in FY 2020, and the same amount is expected for FY 2021. The administration of President Donald J. Trump broadly supported President El-Sisi's efforts to counter radical Islamist violence and to improve religious freedom conditions in Egypt. In October, then U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Acting Administrator John Barsa, then Deputy Assistant to the President Sarah Makin, and then Chief Advisor for International Religious Freedom Samah Norquist [led a delegation](#) to the country that included a rare visit by high-ranking U.S. officials to Upper Egypt, where they joined U.S. Ambassador Jonathan Cohen in meeting with local programs to promote religious freedom in sectarianism-plagued Minya. However, Egypt's detention of EIPR staff members in November [drew sharp, bipartisan rebuke](#) from members of Congress and the State Department—only weeks after 55 members of Congress [issued a letter](#) calling on President El-Sisi to release imprisoned members of Egyptian civil society, naming Ramy Kamel and more than 20 others.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Despite all the complications of managing the Arab world's largest country, often in the crosshairs of terrorists, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves credit for assuming personal responsibility for the republic's interfaith harmony. He has often led by example, has always taken the issue seriously, and has worked personally to protect and foster peaceful coexistence among Egypt's varied religious communities. I commend el-Sisi for it. I have also appreciated his willingness to indulge in direct and brutally honest conversations with various interlocutors along the way, unlike many world leaders. Of course, Egypt must continue along its path until every Egyptian citizen in every part of the country feels they can practice their faith without fear.