

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained poor, consistent with past years. The government of Egypt continued to systematically restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for religious minority communities and individuals who express ideas that differ from the state’s interpretation of Islam.

Egyptian authorities continued to enforce the criminal blasphemy statute, Article 98(f), which punishes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” including through prolonged, pretrial detention for individuals who face related accusations or charges. In January, a Nozha court sentenced composer Ahmed Hegazy to six months in prison for “contempt of religion.” Prison officials reportedly subjected Christian convert [Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges](#)—imprisoned in 2021 on blasphemy and terrorism charges—to abuse and torture. State security also continued to hold without trial [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#), a Yemeni Christian convert whom authorities detained in 2021 for blasphemy after he discussed his conversion online. Authorities have reportedly threatened him with forced deportation back to Yemen, where he would likely face severe repercussions for his beliefs. In July, a military court sentenced Christian conscript Yusuf Sa’d Hanin to three years in prison for allegedly making “statements offensive to Islam” in a private text conversation.

In January and October, a Cabinet-appointed committee approved 480 church and service building permits pursuant to the Church Construction Law, bringing the total number of permits to 3,453 since the law’s 2016 adoption. Currently, the government has yet to act on roughly 2,300 legalization requests for churches and Christian facilities. In contrast, the Ministry of Endowments announced plans in June to invest 18.6 billion pounds (\$366,000) into the renovation, maintenance, and development of more than 12,000 mosques. Although President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s administration previously solicited draft personal status laws

from Christian denominations, the government took no further action in 2024.

While Egyptian security services sometimes moved expeditiously to quell violent incidents against churches, observers criticized authorities’ slow response in other instances, resulting in property damage. In April, reports that an Evangelical congregation had obtained a church construction permit in al-Kom al-Ahmar, Minya Governorate, prompted local mobs to attack nearby Christian communities and set fire to a number of homes. Local authorities failed to prevent the violence despite reported warning signs of worsening sectarian tensions. Anti-Coptic harassment—including the disappearances of young Coptic women—persisted, with reports that authorities were reluctant or unwilling to investigate potential cases of religiously motivated abduction or coercion. In January, police were allegedly hostile and dismissive when the family of Irene Ibrahim, a 21-year-old Coptic woman, reported her disappearance. In August, police purportedly refused to investigate a missing person report from the family of 20-year-old Christina Karim.

Amid these concerns, Egypt’s government maintained some initiatives to recognize and encourage religious inclusivity. Multiple state agencies continued efforts to revive the Holy Family Trail, which includes landmarks sacred to the Coptic community. The government also continued collaborating with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on interreligious programming to promote tolerance between Muslim and Christian women and girls. Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly appointed a Coptic woman to the new Cabinet as minister of local development and two other Christians to head the Beheira and Port Said governorates, increasing that community’s representation in government. The Egyptian government continued its long-term project of removing religiously discriminatory content, although state textbooks continue to reflect some of that concerning material.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise with the Egyptian government during bilateral engagements the need under international law to repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code and phase out its enforcement in the interim;
- Engage with Egypt’s Ministry of Education to obtain updates and assist as needed in the ongoing reform national curriculum to better reflect Egypt’s religiously diverse

history and society while removing or replacing intolerant or inflammatory material; and

- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to engage in scheduled roundtables in Upper Egypt, including local religious leaders, civil society organizations, and government officials, with set agenda items to discuss approvals of houses of worship, religious heritage preservation, and progress toward interreligious tolerance.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold a hearing on religious freedom in Egypt prior to the next designation of

foreign military funding (FMF), requesting testimony and/or attendance from the National Security Council and U.S. Department of State, with topics to include attacks on and forced disappearances of Copts; and

- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Egypt in 2025 to raise key religious freedom issues, including implementation of the 2016 Church Building Law, anti-Christian mob attacks in Upper Egypt, FoRB prisoners, and educational curriculum reform.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

## Background

Egypt's population is approximately [111.2 million](#), an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a, Qur'anist, and other non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than one percent. Egypt's Christians account for at least 10 percent of the population, constituting the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. Over 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, while a minority belong to Evangelical, Catholic, and some smaller denominations. Baha'is may number between 1,000 and 2,000, Jehovah's Witnesses up to 1,500, and the Jewish population has reportedly declined to fewer than 10 people.

Article 2 of Egypt's constitution names Islam as the state religion, with the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 ostensibly provides for freedom of belief, only followers of the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) have a legal basis to publicly practice religion and build places of worship. Since the 1960s, the government has banned Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, maintaining them and other unrecognized religious minorities in a vulnerable position.

## Other Legal and Administrative Challenges

Egypt continued to detain and charge individuals under the Cybercrime Law (175/2018), which includes broad provisions the government uses to censor religious expression. In February, an Egyptian court sentenced Kyrollos Nashed, a professor of engineering at Menoufia University, to six months in prison with a fine of 100,000 pounds (\$2,050) for a Facebook post criticizing a member of the Coptic Orthodox clergy; authorities claimed his post violated "family principles and values" pursuant to the Cybercrime Law. In March, the Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation rejected an appeal from [Marco Girgis](#), a Christian who in 2022 was sentenced to five years in prison on similar charges. Although the government reportedly lifted its travel ban on Muslim Qur'anist [Reda Abdel Rahman](#) in 2024, authorities continued to surveil him while barring him from obtaining a passport and traveling outside Egypt.

National identity cards present unique challenges to those who do not identify as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, as those documents allow only for those specific affiliations. The exception is Baha'is, whose affiliation is marked on identity cards with a dash; however, they face myriad obstacles despite that modest concession. For example, Baha'is' exclusion from existing personal status law for the three recognized religions results in their inability to legally marry or gather for worship. In August, authorities canceled a gathering that a group of Baha'is planned to hold in a public venue. In September, authorities closed a Cairo facility where members of that community had planned to run a program supporting immigrant children, reportedly due to their planned use of Baha'i educational materials.

Leaders of the dwindling Egyptian Jewish community remained concerned over its broader treatment in the country but welcomed government restoration projects for historic synagogues. However,

the Ministry of Culture continued to deny requests to meet with local Jewish leaders concerning their ability to access and digitize the historical Jacques Mosseri Geniza documents, which have remained in the government's possession since 2016.

## Persistent Religious Intolerance in Textbooks and Media

The Ministry of Education launched a long-term effort in 2018 to reform public school curriculum and remove religiously intolerant or inflammatory material on the grounds of religion or belief. This effort resulted in some gradual improvement in textbooks up to the fifth grade but failed to remove other forms of discriminatory content from higher grade textbooks. Current textbooks continued to omit material on the Holocaust and Jewish history in Egypt. Furthermore, the curriculum of the preeminent and state-backed Sunni institution al-Azhar—which maintains a separate primary through secondary school system with government-subsidized textbooks—[teaches](#) a singular religious interpretation, which restricts FoRB for Muslim communities not aligned with that interpretation. The ninth grade "Maliki Jurisprudence" textbook, for example, teaches that vilifying the Prophet and denying the holy scriptures is a crime that should be punished by death. Other textbooks defame Jews as "treacherous by nature" and enemies of Islam while deeming Christians and other non-Muslims "infidels." This curriculum denigrates Baha'is and Ahmadiyya Muslims by framing them as subordinate sects of Islam that promote false beliefs aimed at destroying Shari'a and opposing the Qur'an.

The government also continues to tolerate discourse in state-backed media that invokes antisemitic tropes and Holocaust distortion, including in reference to the ongoing conflict in Gaza and Lebanon. In July, the state-backed Al-Ahram newspaper published an article blaming Jews collectively for "create[ing] terrorism and the terrorists." In October, a newspaper linked to al-Azhar published a Jewish caricature that conflated antisemitic conspiracies with legitimate criticism of Israeli government policy, and it circulated a pamphlet including related conspiratorial tropes.

## Key U.S. Policy

Then U.S. President Joseph R. Biden and then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [spoke](#) or [met several times](#) throughout the year with President El-Sisi and other high-ranking Egyptian officials as part of efforts to broker an end to the Israel-Hamas conflict. [Congressional leaders](#) and civil society groups urged the administration to withhold \$320 million attached to the \$1.3 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2023 FMF for Egypt, citing the country's failure to meet benchmarks including the protection of religious minorities. In September, the administration [approved](#) for the first time since 2020 the full amount of FMF, [despite](#) State Department [reporting](#) on systematic discrimination against religious minorities.