

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained consistent with past years. The government gave selective attention to religious diversity and tolerance, but freedom of religion or belief throughout the country did not substantially increase.

Government-enacted or -tolerated restrictions on members of religious minority groups, theological dissenters, [nonbelievers](#), and their advocates remained entrenched. The government maintained severe legal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, such as longstanding bans on Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’is and enforcement of the criminal blasphemy statute through detention or imprisonment. In July, an emergency state security court sentenced Coptic advocate [Patrick Zaki](#) to three years in prison, prompting [USCIRF](#) and [congressional members](#) to call for his release and resulting in a subsequent presidential pardon. In September, the Ministry of Education announced a new [ban](#) on Muslim female pupils wearing the niqab, or religious face veil, in classrooms during the 2023–2024 academic year.

In [May](#) and [June](#), a Cabinet-appointed committee approved two larger-than-average batches of church legalization permits pursuant to the [2016 Church Construction Law](#). While the law has created a legal pathway for Christian worship sites to achieve status as churches, it has reinforced an inherently discriminatory system, with separate requirements for Christians and no application eligibility at all for other religious minorities, such as Baha’is and Shi’a Muslims. Further, some local communities continued to respond with violence to Christian congregations’ submission of applications to repair or build churches. For example, in September, villagers looted and set [fire](#) to a residential construction site for Copts in Abu-Qurqas, Minya, and in December, rioters in Samalout, Minya, violently [attacked](#) Copts attempting to construct a church under a new legal permit.

While larger-scale violent attacks on religious minorities, especially Copts, did not return to previously high levels, individual incidences of anti-Coptic violence—such as physical attacks on Copts in the workplace—persisted. Against the backdrop of Egypt’s intensifying economic crisis, community liaisons in rural Upper Egypt described an increase in exploitation of women based on their religion, such as lenders pressuring resource-limited Christian widows to convert to Islam in exchange for debt forgiveness. In January 2023, vandals [defaced](#) mosaics of the baby Jesus, Virgin Mary, and Saint Joseph at the Convent of the Holy Virgin in Assiut, following the governorate’s recent restoration of the site to promote tourism.

Although the dwindling Jewish community reported adequate protection by state security forces earlier in the year, the conflict triggered by Hamas’s October 7 terrorist attack on Israel contributed to a rise in anti-Jewish sentiment in Egypt. In October, street protesters in Cairo reportedly chanted a slogan evoking a historical massacre of Jews. In December, Cairo’s Jewish community [canceled](#) public Hanukkah celebrations, citing security concerns.

Amid these and other conditions limiting religious freedom, the government of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi also maintained initiatives to increase public awareness of some types of religious diversity. For example, the Ministry of Education removed some material teaching intolerance toward Christians and Jews from the [textbooks](#) of additional grade levels and added references to interreligious cooperation. However, upper grade textbooks awaiting revision still contained religiously prejudicial content, and the courses of all grades remained [religionized](#) in favor of the government’s interpretation of Sunni Islam. On a positive note, beginning in August, government officials [inaugurated](#) three completed restoration projects for Coptic Orthodox Christian statuary and historic Jewish houses of worship.

### 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); and
  - Raise religious freedom, including the cases of religious prisoners of conscience, in U.S.-Egypt bilateral engagement by encouraging Egypt to:
    - Formally recognize Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and non-Sunni Muslims;
    - Propose universal “houses of worship” legislation with regulations for the construction, repair, and registration of houses of worship consistent for all religions;
    - Align local authorities with national-level policy to phase out the use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of violence against religious minorities;
    - Repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which punishes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and until that is accomplished, limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail; and
  - Implement independent oversight and appeals mechanisms for travel bans and frozen assets of released prisoners of conscience.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to set conditions on Foreign Military Financing (FMF), requiring specified improvements in religious freedom among other human rights.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Staff Visit:** Cairo and Alexandria in May 2023
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Egypt](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa](#)
- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Egypt](#)

## Background

Under Article 2 of Egypt's [constitution](#), Islam is the state religion, with the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 purportedly provides for "absolute" freedom of belief, followers of only the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) have a formal legal basis to publicly practice religion and build places of worship. Since the 1960s, the government has continued to deny legal recognition to Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, subjecting them and other unrecognized religious minorities to a bureaucratic limbo affecting numerous aspects of daily life, such as marriage licenses and cemetery allotments.

Egypt's population is approximately [109.5 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. The majority of Christians are Copts (indigenous Egyptian Christians), with over 90 percent belonging to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church; a minority subscribe to Coptic Evangelical Protestantism, Coptic Catholicism, and some smaller denominations. Baha'is may number between 1,000 and 2,000 and Jehovah's Witnesses up to 1,500. Local and international Jewish organizations reported that the Jewish population—which in the 1940s numbered over [80,000](#)—had declined to fewer than 10 people.

## Legislation, Law Enforcement, and the Judiciary

Authorities' enforcement of several laws—including cybercrime and counterterrorism laws, a criminal [blasphemy](#) statute, and a law against "spreading false news"—continue to pose severe and systematic threats to religious freedom. The courts and state security continued to hold in prolonged detention without trial individuals accused of breaching provision 98(f) of the criminal code, which outlaws "insulting the heavenly religions," or blasphemy. In 2023, courts invoked law 98(f), sometimes in combination with other charges, to renew the detention of [Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed Khalifa](#) for blasphemy and desecration of religious symbols and [Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges](#), who had created a Facebook platform for potential converts to Christianity. State security forces also continued the two-year-long detention without trial of [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#). The Yemeni asylum seeker's publicizing of his conversion to Christianity puts him at risk not only in his country of origin—to which Egyptian authorities may deport him—but also in Egyptian prison, where he is forced to hide his religion from fellow inmates for fear of attacks. In July, an emergency state security court sentenced [Patrick Zaki](#), a human rights researcher, to three years in prison for publishing an editorial on discrimination he and other Copts had faced. USCIRF expressed [concern](#) over the sentencing at a public hearing before the U.S. Congress, and the following day, President El-Sisi [pardoned](#) Zaki, leading to his immediate release.

Minority rights lawyers [reported](#) an alarming lack of transparency and consistency in the judicial system, with Egyptian courts making several rulings that negatively affected religious minority communities. In January, the Court of Cassation [rejected](#) two appeals brought by Souad Thabet, a Coptic woman in her 70s contesting the acquittal of three Muslim male defendants who in 2016 allegedly stripped, beat, and dragged her through the street in reprisal for her son's purported relationship with a Muslim woman. The outcome may have resulted in part from other Coptic victims of the same series of hate crimes succumbing to tacit pressure to participate in an extrajudicial "[reconciliation council](#)," which led to them retracting their testimonies against the alleged perpetrators in those cases. Such reconciliation councils remain in use in rural areas, sometimes with the tolerance or active support of local authorities and often putting victims from minority backgrounds at further disadvantage. Although the formal judicial process has presented its own obstacles to justice for the victims of anti-Coptic terrorist attacks and potential hate crimes, in 2023 some courts—including the Supreme State Security [Court](#) and the Court of [Cassation](#), the highest tribunal in the country—departed from customary leniency toward religious-majority defendants, instead convicting and issuing severe [sentences](#), including the death penalty, to Muslim assailants.

Throughout the year, the government deliberated potential changes to laws affecting marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other critical personal status matters that vary for each of the major religious communities in Egypt. The Judicial Committee of the House of Representatives reviewed drafts and new proposed [amendments](#) submitted by a variety of interlocutors, including Muslim and Christian religious institutions. Adoption laws attracted further scrutiny in the ongoing case of the child "Shenouda" after a court returned him to his Christian foster parents, who may remain ineligible for formal [adoption](#) according to Egypt's prevailing interpretations of Shari'a.

## Key U.S. Policy

International attention on the strategic partnership between the United States and Egypt increased following Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel and Israel's response. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met several times with President El-Sisi and other officials on U.S.-Egyptian interests to alleviate conflict-related humanitarian crises and secure peace in the region. Some organizations [criticized](#) the international community's potential post-October 7 strengthening of ties with Egypt, pointing to the country's unresolved human rights violations.

The U.S. Congress [debated](#) the \$1.3 billion annual FMF, which constituted the majority of the [assistance](#) package to Egypt, and discussed potential additional conditions on future aid to address Egypt's human rights issues. Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [pledged](#) in September to withhold the maximum amount of FMF over Egypt's failure to meet Congress's human rights-related conditions.