



# UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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**United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
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Front Cover: KHUSHPUR, Pakistan, March 4, 2011 – Pakistanis carry the coffin of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's slain minister of minorities, who was assassinated March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for campaigning against the country's blasphemy laws. Bhatti, 42, a close friend of USCIRF, warned in a Washington visit just one month before his death that he had received numerous death threats. More than 15,000 persons attended his funeral. (Photo by Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Sudan, January 9, 2011 – Southern Sudanese line up at dawn in the first hours of the week-long independence referendum to create the world's newest state. The referendum vote was the final milestone in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended more than 20 years of north-south civil war in Sudan. (Photo by Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images)

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The 2011 Annual Report is dedicated to the memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Pakistani Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs. Shahbaz was a courageous advocate for the religious freedoms of all Pakistanis, and he was assassinated on March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for those efforts.

## Egypt

**FINDINGS:** The Egyptian government engaged in and tolerated religious freedom violations before and after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011. Serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt. Violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians remained high during the reporting period. This high level of violence and the failure to convict those responsible – including two of the three alleged perpetrators in the 2010 Naga Hammadi attack – continued to foster a climate of impunity, making further violence more likely. The Egyptian government has failed to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, from violent attacks, including during the transitional period when minority communities are increasingly vulnerable. Since February 11, military and security forces reportedly have used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and Christian demonstrators. Implementation of previous court rulings – related to granting official identity documents to Baha’is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for Christian converts – continues to lag. In addition, the government has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF recommends in 2011, for the first time, that Egypt be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Prior to this year’s recommendation, Egypt had been on USCIRF’s Watch list since 2002.

Religious freedom conditions in Egypt have deteriorated under the Mubarak regime over the past several years, particularly for religious minorities. Since February 11, religious freedom conditions have not improved and attacks targeting religious minorities have continued. In fact, attacks on minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, including by Islamist militants imposing extra-judicial punishments, have risen and have resulted in deaths and injuries. Despite initial efforts by the transitional government to dismantle the state security apparatus, the state of emergency remains in place and discriminatory laws and policies continue to have a negative impact on freedom of religion or belief in Egypt. Since February 11, the lack of adequate security in the streets has contributed to lawlessness in parts of the country, particularly in Upper Egypt.

**PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:** Egypt is experiencing a period of unprecedented transition, the success of which hinges on full respect for the rule of law and compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief. During this period, the U.S. government should direct a portion of existing military assistance to provide heightened protection for Coptic Christians and other religious minorities. In addition, the U.S. government should increase economic assistance for organizations that provide democracy and governance training, as well as for Egyptian civil society groups working to advance human rights and religious freedom reforms. The U.S. government should press the transitional Egyptian government to undertake immediate reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including repealing decrees banning religious minority faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing a unified law for the construction and repair of places of worship. In addition, the United States should more aggressively press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence, including by creating a special unit in the Office of the Public Prosecutor, and to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not placed under the jurisdiction of the new domestic security agency. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Egypt can be found at the end of this chapter.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions**

### *Revolution, Transition, and Heightened Concerns in Egypt*

On February 11, 2011, President Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power following 18 days of a peaceful, popular uprising by the Egyptian people. Subsequently, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took control of the country. Within days of taking over, the SCAF dissolved the parliament, suspended the constitution, formed a committee to recommend constitutional amendments, and called for presidential and parliamentary elections within six months. However, given the volatility of the current situation, it is unclear how this process will proceed.

During the first half of March, the SCAF appointed a new prime minister and new cabinet ministers. On March 19, 77 percent of those Egyptian citizens who cast ballots voted in favor of proposed constitutional amendments. In late March, the SCAF issued a decree incorporating the new amendments into an interim constitution that immediately went into effect. They also announced that the state of emergency would be lifted before parliamentary elections in September 2011, and that presidential elections would follow one or two months afterward. While many opposition groups in Egypt supported the constitutional referendum, some groups expressed concern that the accelerated timetable for the referendum and parliamentary and presidential elections could end up favoring remnants of the former ruling National Democratic Party and members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

Egypt continues to have a number of repressive policies and practices that violate the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Activists inside Egypt increasingly are concerned that extremist groups continue to advance in the country, with detrimental effects on the prospects for genuine democratic reform or improvements in freedom of religion or belief. Some human rights groups advocate that the transitional government should repeal some of the repressive laws and policies related to religious freedom before parliamentary and presidential elections. Others believe that the transitional government is nothing more than a caretaker government which should take limited action until a permanent government is formed later in the year.

Since February 11, the transitional government claims it has begun to dismantle the state security apparatus which has operated under the Emergency Law, in effect since 1981 and most recently renewed for another two years in May 2010. Because Egypt continues to operate under a state of emergency, the government has the option to hear cases involving terrorism or drug trafficking in state security courts rather than criminal courts. The Emergency Laws restrict many human rights, including freedom of religion or belief as well as freedom of expression, assembly, and association. In addition, the state security courts do not provide the right to appeal guilty verdicts. Egyptian and international human rights groups have been critical of the courts' procedures and limits on the rule of law and due process.

Over the years, thousands of persons have been detained without charges under the Emergency Law on suspicion of illegal terrorist or political activity; others continue to serve sentences after being convicted on similar charges. Egyptian and international human rights groups have asserted that the primary purpose of the state security courts is to punish political activism and dissent, even when that dissent is peaceful. These courts also have been used to detain and try individuals deemed by the state to have "unorthodox" or "deviant" Islamic or other religious beliefs or practices. While some "security detainees," including those in detention on account of their religious belief, have been released since February 11, the Emergency Law remains in place.

In March, the new Interior Minister announced that the existing state security branches and offices throughout Egypt would be dissolved and replaced with a new domestic security agency tasked with

maintaining security inside the country and combating terrorism “in line with the constitution and principles of human rights.” While some human rights groups acknowledge this as a positive step, critics believe the new agency will simply re-package the old structure. Although the previous Minister of Interior, Habib El-Adly, and several other high-level security officials have been arrested and are under investigation for a number of crimes, including corruption and ordering the use of force against peaceful protestors, there continue to be accusations that military and security forces are engaging in arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and physical abuse of detainees while in custody. Since February 11, human rights groups have accused the military of arresting hundreds of demonstrators and subsequently holding trials, convicting, and sentencing many to three to five year prison terms. Many of those convicted allegedly did not have access to legal counsel and some of the trials and convictions were carried out the same day.

### *Government Control of Islam and Violations against Muslims and Dissidents*

The government maintains control over all Muslim religious institutions, including mosques and religious endowments, which are encouraged to promote an officially-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. According to Egyptian officials, the government regulates these Muslim institutions and activities as a necessary precaution against religious extremism and terrorism. The state appoints and pays the salaries of all Sunni Muslim imams, all mosques must be licensed by the government, and sermons are monitored by the government.

The government-funded Al-Azhar University is one of the preeminent Sunni Muslim centers of learning in the region. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) of Al-Azhar has legal authority to censor and, since 2004, to confiscate any publications dealing with the Koran and *hadith* (oral traditions). In recent years, the IRC has ruled on the suitability of non-religious books and artistic productions. Al-Azhar also has the legal right to recommend confiscations, but must obtain a court order to do so. The Egyptian government consults Al-Azhar on a wide range of religious issues impacting Muslims in the country. Over the years, clerics and scholars at Al-Azhar have issued discriminatory *fatwas* (religious edicts) and delivered controversial sermons about some non-Muslim faiths, particularly the Baha’i faith, as well as disfavored or dissenting Muslims. Non-Muslims are prohibited from attending Al-Azhar University.

Egyptian law forbids blasphemy through Article 98(f) of its Penal Code, which prohibits citizens from “ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.” This provision has been applied to detain and prosecute members of religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs or whose activities are alleged to jeopardize “communal harmony” or to insult the three “heavenly religions:” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Groups impacted in recent years include Ahmadis, Koranists, and Shi’a and Sufi Muslims.

Beginning in March 2010, government security officials arrested without charge 11 members of the country’s small Ahmadi community; all were subsequently released, with the final six freed on June 7, soon after USCIRF issued a public statement calling for their release. The Ahmadis were charged under Article 98(f) with “contempt for religion” and also on vague Emergency Law charges of undermining social cohesion. They were never prosecuted.

Koranists – a tiny group that accepts only the Koran as the sole source of religious guidance and thus has been accused by the Egyptian government of deviating from Islamic law – also have been targeted in recent years. Many from the Koranist community report discrimination in employment and continue to suffer from harassment and surveillance by security services. Authorities have prevented some members from leaving the country.

Over the years, the small Shi'a Muslim community has faced periodic discrimination, harassment, and arrests. In June 2009, a Shi'a Muslim cleric, Hassan Shehata Moussa, was arrested along with 11 other Shi'a Muslims on charges of using Friday sermons to promote Shi'a ideals, recruiting "foreign elements," leading a banned group, receiving financial support from foreign governments, and possessing books defaming Sunni Islam. Shehata was released in March 2010; however, at least eight Shi'a Muslims remain in prison.

In July 2010, Hani Nazeer, a Coptic Christian blogger from Upper Egypt, was released from prison after nearly two years in detention for posting on his blog a cover of a book deemed insulting to Islam. Despite at least four court orders mandating his release, Nazeer had been detained since October 2008 under a succession of administrative detention orders issued by the Interior Minister using powers provided by the Emergency Law. According to his lawyers, prison officials mistreated Nazeer and pressured him to convert to Islam. In February 2007, a court in Alexandria convicted and sentenced Abdel Karim Suleiman, a 22 year-old blogger and former student at Al-Azhar University, to four years in prison, three years for blaspheming Islam and inciting sectarian strife and one year for criticizing President Hosni Mubarak. Suleiman had used his blog to criticize some activities of Al-Azhar University and attacks on Coptic Christians in Alexandria in October 2005. He was released in November 2010. During his time in prison, Suleiman allegedly suffered physical abuse and was placed in solitary confinement.

### *Islamists and Extremism*

The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist political groups which advocate or seek to establish an Islamic state in Egypt based on their interpretation of Islamic law are illegal organizations under a law prohibiting political parties based on religion. While this prohibition remains in place even after new amendments to the constitution went into effect in March 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups now can form political parties on other platforms. In the November 2010 parliamentary elections, almost all members of the Muslim Brotherhood who ran as independents lost their seats during an election that was described as fraudulent and rigged. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist political groups have used violence in the past to achieve their aims, including the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 and attacks on foreign tourists. Some of these groups persist in advocating violence. Under the Mubarak regime, Egyptian security forces arrested hundreds, if not thousands, of suspected Islamists every year, and some were subject to torture and/or prolonged detention without charge. Human rights groups that closely monitor the detention of such individuals claim that the vast majority are in prison as a result of their political beliefs or activities, and not on the basis of religion.

Since February 11, Egypt has witnessed an increase in crime and lawlessness due to a decrease in police and security presence. Consequently, some Islamist militant groups have used this lapse to impose extra-judicial punishments. For example, in March 2011, Islamist militants clashed with Muslim villagers south of Cairo over demands to close a liquor store and coffee shops. One villager was killed and eight others injured in Kasr el-Bassil, in Fayoum province, in fighting that broke out after militants ordered the owner to close the shops based on their strict interpretation of Islam. An investigation is ongoing.

During the reporting period, Sufi Muslims experienced increased attacks and harassment by Islamist militant groups. In Alexandria, militants targeted at least 16 historic mosques belonging to Sufi orders and attempted to deface and destroy tombs of important Sufi Islamic scholars. Since February 11, 2011, in Qalyoub, north of Cairo, militants attacked at least five Sufi shrines. Islamist militant groups in Egypt deem as heretical a number of Sufi religious practices, including the veneration of saints. By the end of the reporting period, no one had been brought to justice for any of the attacks on Sufi places of worship, and investigations are ongoing.



## *Violence Targeting Christians*

During the reporting period, there continued to be a high incidence of violent attacks targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians and their property. In most cases, perpetrators have not been convicted. In other cases, the alleged perpetrators have been briefly detained but eventually released without charge. The ongoing violence, and the failure to prosecute those responsible, continued to foster a climate of impunity, especially in Upper Egypt. In recent years, in response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities have conducted “reconciliation” sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compelled victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. This continued during the reporting period. USCIRF has stated that reconciliation efforts should not be used to undermine enforcing the law and punishing perpetrators for wrongdoing. The State Department also has concluded that reconciliation sessions not only “prevented the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution” but also “contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults.”

Below are examples of violent incidents – primarily during the reporting period – impacting the Coptic Orthodox community, who comprise approximately 10 to 15 per cent of Egypt’s 80 million people.

In March 2011, in the Upper Egypt town of Qena, a group of extremists cut off the ear of a Coptic Christian man. The group claimed it was applying a *sharia* (Islamic law) punishment. The Christian man agreed to compensation during a subsequent reconciliation session instead of pursuing criminal charges because the extremists allegedly threatened his family.

In early March in Cairo, 13 people were killed and nearly 150 wounded in clashes that erupted during large-scale demonstrations by Christians protesting the destruction of a church in the provincial town of Sol. The demonstrators called for the rebuilding of the church, punishment of perpetrators, and better treatment by Egyptian authorities. Some of the demonstrations reportedly blocked major highways. According to some accounts, the Egyptian military stood by for as long as four hours without intervening in the clashes. Egyptian officials said that all of those killed died of gunshot wounds, although it is still unclear who was responsible for the killings. An investigation is ongoing. Some Coptic groups claimed that all the victims were Christians, while other reports indicated that as many as five Muslims were killed. Much of the violence took place in eastern Cairo in the well-known Christian neighborhood popularly known as “Garbage City.”

The church in Sol had been destroyed by arson several days earlier by local Muslims after clashes between Christians and Muslims left two dead. The clashes reportedly resulted from a feud between the families of a Christian man and a Muslim woman who allegedly were having a romantic relationship. On March 10, Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Sheikh at Al-Azhar, condemned the attack on the church. In addition, the Egyptian military announced that it would rebuild the church by Easter. By the end of the reporting period, the military had completed initial construction and remained committed to meeting its self-imposed deadline.

In late February, one monk and six church workers were injured when the Egyptian military reportedly used excessive force and live ammunition at the Anba Bishoy monastery in Wadi Natroun, north of Cairo, to destroy a wall monks had built to defend their property from criminals recently set free from local prisons. According to reports, military forces used heavy machine guns and armored personnel carriers to bulldoze the wall. According to church authorities, as security diminished following the January 25 revolution, the monastery had come under increasing attacks from raiders and criminals. The military denied a request for protection from the monks, who subsequently built a brick wall with a metal gate to control access. The military claimed the monastery had not acquired the proper permits and issued a deadline for the wall to be torn down. After the deadline passed, the military demolished the wall.

On January 11, 2011, an off-duty police officer opened fire in a train in Minya province, killing one Christian and injuring five others. The shooter, a Muslim, was charged with murder and will be tried in a state security court. The Ministry of Interior denied the shooting was sectarian. Coptic activists have suggested that the attack was religiously motivated, although other groups have not been able to confirm this.

On January 1, 2011, a bomb detonated in front of a Coptic church, Al Qiddissin (Two Saints), in Alexandria, where a New Year's prayer service was being held. At least 23 Christians were killed and nearly 100 wounded in the worst sectarian attack on Christians in Egypt in more than a decade. On January 23, then-Interior Minister Habib El-Adly asserted that conclusive evidence pointed to a militant group, *Army of Islam*, as responsible for the attack. The group, based in Gaza and linked to al-Qaeda, denied responsibility. In February, after El-Adly was removed as Interior Minister, Egypt's general prosecutor initiated an investigation into whether the ex-Minister had a role in the January 1 attack. Investigations of the bombing and the role of the Ministry of Interior in the incident are ongoing.

In November 2010, police and Coptic Christians clashed in Giza after the government stopped construction on a church-owned building. At least two Christians died and dozens were injured. According to media reports, the building in question originally was licensed as a community center in 2009. The government ordered a halt on construction when it grew concerned that the building was being transformed into a place of worship, which would require a different kind of permit. The clashes began when police cordoned off the construction site and escalated when an estimated 700 Christians took their protests to the governor's headquarters, where the riot police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. Also in November, more than a dozen Coptic Christian homes and several businesses were burned and looted in the Qena province of southern Egypt after rumors spread, including in local media, about a romantic relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. Security officials imposed a curfew and arrested several Muslims, although no one has been charged with any crime.

In September 2010, in the Omraneya district of Cairo, Egyptian authorities reportedly used excessive force and live ammunition on peaceful demonstrators protesting the government's continued refusal to approve a license to build a local church extension. Two people, including a teenager, were killed, and dozens were wounded. No one has been brought to justice.

On January 6, 2010, in the town of Naga Hammadi, Qena Governorate, three men sprayed automatic gunfire on Coptic churchgoers leaving midnight Christmas Mass. At least seven people were killed – six Christians and one off-duty Muslim police officer – and several others were wounded. Some argued the attack was in retaliation for a November 2009 incident in which a 12-year-old Muslim girl was rumored to have been sexually assaulted by a Christian man in a nearby town (see below); others suggested that a political vendetta could have been a factor. Three men were arrested and tried in a state security court. The public prosecutor recommended that each of the three alleged perpetrators should receive the death penalty. On January 16, 2011, the court convicted and sentenced to death one of the three, Mohamed Ahmed Hussein. Hussein is widely identified as the man who pulled the trigger in the shooting. On February 20, 2011, the court ratified the verdict against Hussein but acquitted the two other men, who were known to be accomplices in the killings. Coptic activists and human rights groups were outraged by the acquittals, which further reinforced the climate of impunity for the killing of Christians in Egypt.

In November 2009, in Farshout and other villages in the Qena Governorate, rumors that a 20-year-old Coptic man had sexually assaulted a 12-year-old Muslim girl sparked massive violence by Muslims against the Coptic Christian community. Rioting ensued for five days, resulting in millions of dollars in damage to Christian-owned businesses. The rape case against the Christian man is ongoing.

On a positive note, in February 2010 in the Qena Governorate of Upper Egypt, a court convicted and sentenced to life in prison five Muslim men for the murder of two Christian men in the spring of 2009.

In 2004, the Court of Cassation upheld the acquittal of 94 out of the 96 persons suspected of involvement in the killing of 21 Christians in Al-Kosheh in late 1999 and early 2000. Some Egyptian human rights advocates believe that Egyptian authorities should still investigate claims of police negligence and inadequate prosecution of those involved in this violence.

### *Incitement to Violence against Christians*

In the months leading up to the November 2010 parliamentary elections, an increase in incitement to violence in Egyptian media and government-funded mosques exacerbated sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians. In September and October, Egyptian government officials spoke out against incitement to violence, particularly in the media, and temporarily shut down several satellite television stations, including Al-Nas and Al-Rahma, that aired programming espousing religious hatred and violence. In September, Qatar-owned Al-Jazeera broadcast a program which alleged that the Coptic Church has its own militia and hides weapons and ammunition in monasteries and churches and is preparing for a war against the Muslims. The program also accused Coptic Christians of “inciting sectarian strife and seeking to have their own separate state in Egypt.” Pope Shenouda expressed his concern over the “baseless” claims and dismissed the rumors of a separate “Coptic state.”

In July 2010, Camilia Shehata, the wife of a Coptic bishop in the Minya province, reportedly left her home after a family dispute. Rumors surfaced in the Christian community that she had been kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam, and Coptic Christians participated in large-scale demonstrations demanding her return. After a few days passed, representatives of the Coptic Church stated that she had never converted to Islam and that she had returned home safely and willingly. Nevertheless, the incident sparked outrage within Islamist and extremist circles. For example, weeks after the incident, some Islamist groups urged Bedouins in Sinai to kidnap and kill Christian tourists in retaliation for the alleged kidnapping of Shehata, who they claimed converted to Islam and was being held against her will by the Coptic Church. They also made reference to Wafaa Constantine, another wife of a Coptic priest, who they alleged also had converted to Islam and was kidnapped by the Coptic Church in December 2004. According to representatives of the Coptic Church, Constantine also had been involved in a dispute with her husband and never had converted to Islam. In addition, in its claim of responsibility for the October 31, 2010 attack on a church in Baghdad, an al Qaeda-affiliated group in Iraq stated that the attack was in retaliation for the Coptic Church in Egypt’s detention against their will of Shehata and Constantine, even though the women themselves disputed these allegations. The group stated that the Coptic Church had 48 hours to free Shehata and Constantine, otherwise al Qaeda would target Christians in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.

On March 12, 2010 in Marsa Matrouh, northern Egypt, the prayer leader of the Al-Rifayah mosque allegedly incited some 250 Muslim worshippers to demolish a wall that was under construction by a nearby Coptic church. The wall reportedly encroached on part of a road leading to the mosque. The Muslim worshippers left the mosque after Friday afternoon prayers, approached the church compound and began throwing Molotov cocktails and stones at and over the wall. Approximately two dozen Coptic Christians inside the compound were injured. There were reprisal attacks by some Christians from inside the compound. According to the State Department and media reports, police and security forces responded adequately and arrested approximately 14 Copts and 16 Muslims. The compound suffered damage and at least two vehicles and three homes owned by Copts were set on fire. To date, no charges have been filed.

### *Discrimination against Christians*

In addition to violence, Christians face official and societal discrimination. Although Egyptian government officials claim that there is no law or policy that prevents Christians from holding senior positions, the Coptic Orthodox Christian community faces *de facto* discrimination in appointments to high-level government and military posts. There are only a handful of Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. There is one Christian governor out of 28, one elected Member of Parliament out of 454 seats, no known university presidents or deans, and very few legislators or judges. According to the State Department, public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers exclude non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Koran. Under Egyptian law, Muslim men can marry Christian women but Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men. Contacts between such persons are often a source of tension between Muslim and Christian communities in Egypt.

For all Christian groups, government permission is required to build a new church or repair an existing one, and the approval process for church construction is time-consuming and inflexible. President Mubarak had the authority to approve applications for new construction of churches. Although most of these applications were submitted more than five years ago, the majority have not received a response. Even some permits that have been approved cannot, in fact, be acted upon because of interference by the state security services at both the local and national levels.

In 2005, President Mubarak signed a decree transferring authority for granting permits to renovate or repair existing churches from the president to the country's 28 governors. At the time, observers welcomed this step as a major improvement, but several years later, many churches continue to face delays in the issuance of permits. The Egyptian government claims most such requests are approved. However, even in cases where approval to build or maintain churches has been granted, many Christians continue to complain that local security services prevent construction or repair, in some cases for many years.

In May 2010, the Coptic Orthodox Church stated that a Supreme Administrative court ruling breached the church's authority. The court's ruling permitted divorced Coptic Christians to remarry. According to government policy, the application of personal status law, including marriage and divorce, is subject to official church law, not the law of the state. The Coptic Church in Egypt only permits divorce in cases of adultery or the conversion of one spouse to another religion or another Christian denomination.

### *Converts and Reconverts to Christianity*

Although neither the Constitution nor the Penal Code prohibits proselytizing or conversion, the Egyptian government has used Article 98(f) of the Penal Code to prosecute alleged proselytizing by non-Muslims. Known converts from Islam to Christianity generally receive scrutiny from the state security services; most conversions, therefore, are done privately. In some instances, converts, who fear government harassment if they officially register their change in religion from Islam to Christianity, reportedly have altered their own identification cards and other official documents to reflect their new religious affiliation. Some individuals have been arrested for falsifying identity documents following conversion. Other converts have fled the country for fear of government and societal repercussions.

In December 2008, an administrative court in Alexandria awarded Fathi Labib Yousef the right to register as a Christian after spending 31 years officially identified as a Muslim. Yousef was raised as a Coptic Orthodox Christian but converted to Islam in 1974 in order to divorce his Christian wife. He returned to Christianity in 2005, but the local civil registry office refused to acknowledge his change of religion. Despite the favorable court ruling, Yousef has not been able to obtain his new documents by the end of

the reporting period. In recent years, many local government registry offices have not changed official identity documents to reflect new religious affiliations, citing various excuses, despite judicial rulings that legally mandate such action.

In February 2008, Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court ruled that 12 individuals who were born Christian could not be legally prohibited from returning to Christianity after converting to Islam. However the court ruled that their identity documents must list them as "formerly declared Muslim," thus potentially making them subject to continued discrimination in the provision of public services, police harassment, and societal violence. In March 2008, an Egyptian judge appealed the ruling to the Supreme Constitutional Court. According to the State Department, on February 12, 2011, the court ruled that more than 500 reconverts to Christianity would be permitted to obtain new national identity documents indicating their Christian faith without having to be listed as "formerly declared Muslims." As of this writing, it is unclear if the reconverts have been able to obtain new identity documents.

In addition, reports in recent years support claims that there were cases of Muslim men forcing Coptic Christian women to convert to Islam. The State Department has asserted that such cases are often disputed and include "inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape." Nevertheless, in recent years, human rights groups have found that there were credible cases where Coptic women were "deceptively lured" into marriages with Muslim men and forced to convert to Islam. According to reports, if a woman returns or escapes from the marriage and wants to convert back to Christianity, she faces the same legal hurdles in changing her religious affiliation on official identity documents as discussed above.

In contrast to the re-conversion cases, the Egyptian government generally does not recognize conversions of Muslims to other religions. Egyptian courts also have refused to allow Muslims who convert to Christianity to change their identity cards to reflect their conversions. In the first such case, brought by Muhammad Hegazy, a lower court ruled in January 2008 that Muslims are forbidden from converting away from Islam based on principles of Islamic law. The court also stated that such conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and an enticement for other Muslims to convert. Hegazy, who has received death threats and currently is in hiding, has appealed the ruling. In April 2010, a Cairo court suspended the case indefinitely until the country's constitutional court rules on the constitutionality of a previous case on Article 47 of the civil code, which allows citizens the right to change their name and religion on identity documents.

The second such case was filed in August 2008 by Maher El-Gohary, who received threats from extremists and spent time in hiding. In June 2009, the Seventh Circuit Court of Administrative Justice ruled against El-Gohary, finding that a convert must prove his conversion to the state and that El-Gohary's behavior contradicted his claim to be a Christian. The court also ruled that, because Egypt had ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights "taking into consideration the provisions of Islamic Law and the absence of contradiction between these provisions and the Covenant," sharia takes precedence in the event of a contradiction. In December 2010, a court ordered the Ministry of Interior to lift a travel ban on El-Gohary; the ban was lifted on February 13, 2011, and El-Gohary and his daughter Dina left the country.

### *Baha'is*

All Baha'i institutions and community activities have been banned since 1960 by a presidential decree. As a result, the approximately 2,000 Baha'is who live in Egypt are unable to meet or engage in group religious activities. Over the years, Baha'is have been arrested and imprisoned because of their religious beliefs, often on charges of insulting Islam. Almost all Baha'i community members are known to the state security services, and many are regularly subject to surveillance and other forms of harassment. Al-

Azhar's Islamic Research Center has issued *fatwas* in recent years urging the continued ban on the Baha'i community and condemning Baha'is as apostates.

Intolerance of Baha'is has increased in both the independent and government-controlled media in recent years. In March 2009, several Baha'i homes in a village in the Sohag province were vandalized by Muslim villagers. Egyptian human rights groups immediately condemned the violence and contended that it had been prompted by incitement by a media commentator who, during a television program, labeled an individual member of the Baha'i faith an apostate and called for her to be killed. More than two years after the incident, there has been no investigation or prosecution. In late February 2011, after rumors that the Baha'i families would be returning to the homes vandalized in 2009, several Baha'i homes in the Sohag province reportedly were set on fire by local villagers. An Egyptian human rights group alleged that at least two local security officers incited local villagers to attack the homes. An investigation is ongoing.

In March 2009, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected a final legal challenge to a 2008 lower court ruling that required the Egyptian government to issue national identification documents to three Baha'i plaintiffs containing a dash or other mark in the space designated for religious affiliation. Until this ruling, identification documents permitted registration in only one of the three officially approved faiths – Islam, Christianity, or Judaism – thereby effectively preventing Baha'is from gaining the official recognition necessary to have access to numerous public services, and without which it is illegal to go out in public. Since the 2008 decision, the government has issued birth certificates to at least 120 Baha'is, documents which it previously had refused to issue. In addition, approximately 20 to 30 single male and female Baha'is have received identity cards. Nevertheless, there continue to be delays in granting identity cards to Baha'is, and since the January 25, 2011 revolution, local state security offices are understaffed in many parts of the country and, therefore, have not been processing documents. Over the past few years, some Baha'is lost their jobs and a few young Baha'is were dismissed from universities because they did not have identity cards.

No married Baha'i couples have received identity cards because the Egyptian government does not recognize Baha'i marriages. According to sources in Egypt, in 2010 a committee of the National Council for Human Rights drafted an amendment that would enable the Ministry of Justice to register Baha'i marriages. The suggested amendment was to be presented to the parliament in early 2011. However, the January 25 revolution and subsequent dissolving of the parliament have put it on hold.

#### *Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Community*

In 2010, material vilifying Jews – with both historical and new anti-Semitic stereotypes – continued to appear regularly in the state-controlled and semi-official media. This material includes anti-Semitic cartoons, images of Jews and Jewish symbols that reference Israel or Zionism, comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis, and Holocaust denial literature. Egyptian authorities have not taken adequate steps to combat anti-Semitism in the media, despite official claims that they have advised journalists to avoid anti-Semitism. Egyptian officials claim that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government policy toward Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism. Human rights groups cite persistent, virulent anti-Semitism in the education system, which increasingly is under the influence of Islamist extremists, a development the Egyptian government has not adequately addressed.

The small Jewish community of approximately 125 people owns its property and finances required maintenance largely through private donations. In 2007, Egyptian authorities, including the Minister of Culture and the head of the Ministry's Supreme Council of Antiquities, pledged to move forward over the next few years with the restoration of at least seven synagogues, as well as the possible development of a

Jewish museum. Restoration of the Maimonides synagogue in Cairo, named after a 12<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic scholar, was completed in March 2010.

### *Jehovah's Witnesses*

A 1960 presidential decree banned all Jehovah's Witnesses activities. According to the State Department, there are between 800 and 1,200 Jehovah's Witnesses living in Egypt. In recent years, Egyptian authorities monitored the homes, phones, and private meeting places of members of this small community. For years, the Jehovah's Witnesses pursued legal recognition through the court system. In December 2009, the Seventh Circuit Administrative Court handed down a verdict denying Jehovah's Witnesses legal status. The local community is appealing the verdict.

### *Other Developments Internationally and in Egypt*

In February 2010, Egypt underwent its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the UN Human Rights Council. The head of Egypt's delegation stated that freedom of religion and worship are guaranteed in the constitution and are not limited by law. Despite such constitutional protections, in practice the law is arbitrarily and inconsistently applied. The Egyptian delegation also characterized relations between Muslims and Coptic Christians as "healthy and positive," attributing recent sectarian tensions to extremism and asserting that the law is implemented whenever violent incidents occur. The recommendations that the Egyptian delegation supported at the UPR included those that urged the government to take all necessary measures to guarantee religious freedom, prevent discrimination that affects this freedom, and promote inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. The delegation rejected recommendations which urged the Egyptian government to remove any categorization of religion on official government documents and to eliminate the legal and bureaucratic restrictions that complicate an individual's right to choose his or her religion.

In January 2011, Al-Azhar University indefinitely suspended the annual dialogue between the Vatican's Joint Committee for Dialogue and the Permanent Committee of Al Azhar for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions. Al-Azhar cited public comments by Pope Benedict as "insulting... towards Islam" and stated that a speech by Pope Benedict suggested that "Muslims are discriminating against others who live with them in the Middle East." In addition, after Pope Benedict issued a January 2011 statement following the Alexandria church bombing urging governments in the region to protect their Christian minorities, the Egyptian government withdrew its Ambassador to the Vatican, citing interference in internal affairs. After more than a month, the Egyptian government returned its ambassador in late February.

In 2010, the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), a government-appointed advisory body, released its sixth annual report expressing serious concern about rising sectarian tensions and discrimination against dissident Muslims, particularly Shi'a Muslims. Unlike in previous years, the report did not provide recommendations on religious freedom to the government.

In April 2010, Egyptian Education Minister Ahmed Zaki Badr announced that the religious curriculum in schools would be modified for the 2010-2011 school year. The government said it was responding to complaints that some content in textbooks incited extremism and violence. It is unclear if offending passages were removed from the textbooks currently being used in schools.

### **U.S. Policy**

For years, U.S. policy toward Egypt has focused on fostering strong bilateral relations, continuing security and military cooperation, maintaining regional stability, and sustaining the 1979 Camp David

peace accords. Successive administrations viewed Egypt as a key ally in the region. Until a few years ago, Egypt was the second largest recipient of U.S. aid; however, it now ranks fifth behind Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, and Pakistan. In recent years, the U.S. government and Congress have increased efforts to urge the Egyptian government to make more expeditious progress on economic and political reforms, including on human rights and religious freedom issues. According to the State Department's 2010 *Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report*, the U.S. government seeks, through programming and advocacy, to "build a more robust civil society, address human rights problems, promote the rule of law, increase democratic local governance, and encourage the growth of democratic institutions, including an independent media and judiciary."

In 2010, more frequently than in previous years, the U.S. government highlighted human rights and religious freedom concerns in Egypt through public statements and remarks. For example, on January 1, 2011, President Obama issued a strong statement condemning the New Year's Day bombing of a church targeting Christians in Alexandria and offered assistance to the Egyptian government to bring the perpetrators to justice. Also, in October 2010, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner publicly raised in Cairo ongoing concerns about sectarian violence, urging accountability and the promotion of tolerance and religious freedom.

During the first few days of the January 25, 2011 revolution in Egypt, the Obama administration remained supportive of the Mubarak regime. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed confidence that the regime was stable and urged peaceful protests by the Egyptian people. As the demonstrations continued and grew, high-level U.S. government officials expressed concern about incidents of government violence against peaceful protestors. President Obama advocated that Mubarak step down, which he did on February 11. In March 2011, Secretary of State Clinton visited Egypt and announced \$90 million in near-term emergency U.S. economic assistance and \$80 million in U.S. Export Import Bank insurance coverage to support letters of credit issued by Egyptian financial institutions. Secretary Clinton also pledged to secure quick congressional passage of a \$60 million U.S.-Egypt Enterprise Fund, a program to stimulate investment and provide Egyptian businesses with access to low-cost loans. Secretary Clinton did not raise religious freedom concerns publicly during her visit, although she was accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner.

U.S. assistance reflects the recognition of Egypt's continued and crucial role in ensuring Arab-Israeli peace. In May 2010, it became publicly known that the U.S. government had been negotiating with Egypt about the possibility of creating a new endowment, the "Egyptian-American Friendship Foundation," that would replace traditional economic assistance and bypass congressional oversight. The Obama administration eventually distanced itself from these negotiations after public criticism, including by members of Congress.

Overall U.S. aid to Egypt has decreased from \$2.1 billion annually until the late 1990s to approximately \$1.5 billion in 2011. While Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance has remained steady at approximately \$1.3 billion for 30 years, Economic Support Fund (ESF) assistance has declined significantly over the last decade pursuant to a 10-year agreement reached in the 1990s known as the "Glide Path Agreement." As a result, economic aid to Egypt decreased approximately \$40 million each year from \$815 million in Fiscal Year 1998 to \$411 million in FY2008. In FY 2011, total ESF assistance was \$250 million and for FY2012, the administration again has requested \$250 million. For FY2010, \$25 million was allotted for democracy and governance, with \$10.5 million for rule of law and human rights programming, \$6 million for good governance and anticorruption programs, and \$8.5 million to support Egyptian civil society. This included \$4.6 million in direct grants to civil society organizations, with the remaining \$3.9 million under the "civil society" heading designated for a media development program run in conjunction with the Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.



In recent years, experts expressed serious concern that due to the overall decrease in ESF funding, human rights and religious freedom programming has decreased proportionally to an inconsequential amount. Only a small portion of U.S. programming supports initiatives in areas related to religious freedom, including funding for programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services that work with Coptic and Muslim community groups in Upper Egypt, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for sectarian bias.

In addition, there is ongoing concern about the degree of Egyptian government control over U.S. funding of civil society and human rights groups in Egypt. Direct grants to registered Egyptian NGOs are vetted by the Egyptian government. As a consequence, many new Egyptian NGOs do not seek formal registration, and instead form a civil corporation, to avoid unnecessary government interference and oversight. In the past, the Egyptian government claimed that even U.S. funding of civil corporations violates Egyptian law, which casts doubt on the ability of the U.S. government to continue to support the programs and activities it already funds.

In recent years, Congress and others have urged that U.S. aid to Egypt should be conditioned on improvements in Egypt's human rights and religious freedom record. In fact, some members of Congress and other experts have argued that U.S. assistance has not been effective in promoting democracy and human rights reform and that foreign assistance must be renegotiated to include benchmarks that the Egyptian government must meet to continue to receive aid. Since Mubarak stepped down in February 2011, Congress has focused on emergency funding to encourage economic development and investment in Egypt.

In November 2010, the State Department concluded that religious freedom conditions remained poor, unchanged from 2009. The three previous years, 2007-2009, the State Department stated that religious freedom conditions in Egypt had declined. This assertion did not result in any significant change in U.S. policy towards Egypt other than through public comments and statements.

## **Recommendations**

As described above, the Egyptian government has engaged in and tolerated religious freedom violations before and after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011. During the reporting period, violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians remained high and the Egyptian government failed to convict those responsible for the violence. In addition, the Egyptian government has failed to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, from violent attacks, including during the transitional period when minority communities are increasingly vulnerable. Since February 11, military and security forces reportedly have used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and Christian demonstrators. Despite initial efforts by the transitional government to dismantle the state security apparatus, the state of emergency remains in place and discriminatory laws and policies continue to have a negative impact on freedom of religion or belief in Egypt.

Accordingly, based on the Egyptian government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, USCIRF is recommending for the first time that Egypt be designated a country of particular concern. As a consequence, the U.S. government should direct a portion of existing military assistance and emergency economic assistance to enhance security for religious minority communities and fund civil society groups who respect the rule of law and international human rights standards. In addition, the United States should press the Egyptian transitional government to implement a series of reforms over the next six months to advance freedom of religion or belief and related human rights, including election reform.

## **I. As a Consequence of CPC Designation, Directing a Targeted Amount of Military and Economic Assistance During Egypt's Transition**

The U.S. government should:

- ensure that a portion of the existing \$1.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing for the Egyptian government goes toward heightened security for religious minority communities and their places of worship, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, Sufi Muslims, and Jews;
- conduct or support specialized training, either in Egypt or abroad, for Egyptian military and police forces on human rights standards and non-lethal responses to crowd control and to quell sectarian violence;
- provide and increase Economic Support Funding for democracy and governance organizations for political party development and other training for Egyptian groups and parties, and require the democracy and governance organizations to certify to the U.S. government that no such funds shall be allocated to or dispersed for such groups and parties without first determining that each of them:

--does not advocate or use violence;

--does not discriminate against women or against individuals or groups on the basis of religious affiliation or religious belief with respect to equality before the law and equal protection of the law;

--demonstrates full respect for the rule of law;

--publicly pledges to uphold the individual right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief, and the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance; and

--publicly pledges to uphold the individual right to freedom of expression, including the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The U.S. Congress should:

- require the Departments of State and Defense to report every 90 days on the Egyptian transitional government's progress on the issues described in this section, as well as on the U.S. government's progress in offering funding directly to Egyptian NGOs without prior Egyptian government approval.

## **II. Ensuring that Responsibility for Religious Affairs Not Fall Within the Jurisdiction of the New Egyptian Domestic Security Agency**

The U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to:

- repeal the state of emergency, in existence since 1981, in order to allow for the full consolidation of the rule of law in Egypt;
- ensure that *de facto* responsibility for religious affairs does not fall under the jurisdiction of the new domestic security agency, with the exception of espionage cases or cases involving violence or the advocacy of violence, including conspiracy to commit acts of terror;

- pass a unified law that would subject all places of worship to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient regulations regarding construction and maintenance, and take special measures to preserve and restore Coptic Orthodox and other Christian properties and antiquities that have been subject to societal violence and official neglect; and
- consistent with the UN Human Rights Council’s March 2011 resolution on “combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief,” repeal Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which “prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife” and, in the interim, provide the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating Article 98(f).

### **III. Implementing Additional Reform Within the Next 180 Days in Order to Comply with International Human Rights Standards**

The U.S. government should urge the transitional Egyptian government to:

- establish a special unit in the Office of the Public Prosecutor dedicated to investigating acts of violence against Egyptian citizens on the basis of religion or belief, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, vigorously prosecuting and bringing to justice perpetrators, and ensuring compensation for victims;
- address incitement to imminent violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims by:
  - prosecuting in regular criminal courts government-funded clerics, government officials, or individuals who incite violence against Muslim minority communities or individual members of non-Muslim religious minority communities;
  - disciplining or dismissing government-funded clerics who espouse intolerance;
  - publicly and officially refuting incitement to violence and discrimination by clerics and the government-controlled media against Muslim minority communities, such as the Koranists, and members of non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Baha’is; and
  - rescinding any previously-issued fatwas by Al-Azhar that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against Muslim minority communities or non-Muslim religious minority communities;
- discontinue the use of reconciliation sessions as a bypass for punishing perpetrators, commensurate with the gravity of the crime and in accordance with the rule of law;
- repeal 1960 presidential decrees banning members of the Baha’i faith and Jehovah’s Witnesses from practicing their faith, and officially recognize other minority faiths;
- remove mention of religious affiliation from national identity documents;
- cease all messages of hatred and intolerance in the government-controlled media and take active measures to promote understanding and respect for members of minority religious communities;

- take all appropriate steps to prevent and punish acts of anti-Semitism, including condemnation of anti-Semitic acts, and, while vigorously protecting freedom of expression, counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities;
- permit any Egyptian citizen to learn voluntarily the Coptic language in the public school system; and
- investigate claims of police negligence and inadequate prosecution of those involved in the Al-Kosheh case, as well as other recent instances of violence targeting individuals on account of their religion or belief, particularly members of the vulnerable Coptic Orthodox Christian community.

#### **IV. Ensuring that U.S. Government Aid Promotes Prompt and Genuine Political and Legal Reforms and is Offered Directly to Egyptian Civil Society Groups**

The U.S. government should:

- provide direct support to human rights and other civil society or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) without vetting by the Egyptian government;
- urge the Egyptian government to ensure that NGOs engaged in human rights work can pursue their activities without government interference, and monitor and report to what extent this is accomplished; and
- expand support of initiatives to advance human rights, promote religious tolerance, and foster civic education among all Egyptians, including support for:
  - revising all textbooks and other educational materials to remove any language or images that promote enmity, intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on faith, gender, ethnicity, or nationality, and including in all school curricula, textbooks, and teacher training the concepts of tolerance and respect for human rights of all persons, including religious freedom;
  - civic education and public awareness programs that reflect the multi-confessional nature of Egyptian society and the diversity of Egypt's religious past;
  - efforts by Egyptian and international NGOs to review Egyptian educational curricula and textbooks for messages of hatred, intolerance, and the advocacy of violence, and to monitor equal access to education by girls and boys regardless of religion or belief; and
  - preserving and restoring Egyptian Jewish properties and antiquities in publicly accessible sites.

#### **V. Promoting Freedom of Religion and Belief and Related Human Rights in Multilateral Fora**

The U.S. government should:

- call on the Egyptian government to comply with and fully implement recommendations from the UN Human Rights Council's February 2010 Universal Periodic Review of Egypt, including those related to freedom of religion or belief;

- urge the Egyptian government to invite, provide specific dates, and admit UN special procedures mandate holders who are waiting for an invitation, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture; and
- urge the Egyptian government to implement the 2002 recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture, as well as other relevant international human rights treaties to which Egypt is a party.

**Statement of Commissioner Nina Shea, with whom Chairman Leonard Leo and Vice Chair Elizabeth H. Prodromou Join:**

We write separately to underscore the concern that Egypt is on a trajectory that is part of a broader trend toward the irreparable and severe diminution of Christian and religious minority populations.

In several countries covered in this report – Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – the non-Muslim religious minority communities are facing existential threats while experiencing varying degrees and manifestations of religious intolerance and injustice. Every one of the religious minority communities in these countries – whether Jewish, Zoroastrian, Yazidi, Mandaean, Baha’i, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or other – is rapidly shrinking. In these pivotal countries, this report paints a dire picture of ongoing religious cleansing and ineffectual American responses.

In most of these countries, religious demographics are kept as state secrets. However, while the data are imprecise, it is recognized that Christians are by far the largest remaining non-Muslim group, and that their numbers are greatest in Egypt and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon and Syria, which are not part of this report. It is estimated that region-wide, they number no more than 15 million, a small fraction of the overall population.

The most dramatic example of persecution is in Iraq. Since 2004, a relentless wave of Islamist terrorist attacks targeting Iraq's indigenous Christians and their churches, combined with government discrimination, has prompted them to flee en masse. At the time of Saddam Hussein’s fall, the number of Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Armenians, Syriacs, and other Christians in Iraq was estimated at 1.4 million. Half of these have since fled, and some observers wonder how long it will be before the remaining half leaves.

The smallest religious minority communities have contracted even more sharply. Since the establishment of the state of Israel, some of the region’s Jews voluntarily left Muslim-majority countries; but as many as 850,000, such as the Jews of Baghdad sixty years ago, were driven out and forced to leave land and possessions behind, by freelance terror and government policies. The parts of Iraq and Egypt that had been great Jewish centers since Old Testament times now have Jewish populations numbering in single and triple digits, respectively. Sabean Mandaeans, mostly based in Baghdad and Basra, are down to 5,000, one-tenth of their pre-2003 population of 50,000. Yazidis, who draw upon Zoroastrian beliefs, are found in northern Iraq; hundreds of thousands of them have fled in recent years, leaving half a million still in their native land.

The threats are not confined to Iraq. By far, the largest non-Muslim minority community among these countries is Egypt’s Copts, numbering between 8 and 12 million. A year and a half ago, Coptic worshippers were massacred during a Christmas Eve attack on their church in Naga Hammadi in southern Egypt. This year, a crowded church in Alexandria was bombed by militants at New Year, and several Coptic villages have been targeted by pogrom-like mob violence. Attacks against the Copts were carried out largely with impunity under an indifferent Mubarak regime. A recent announcement that the rising

Muslim Brotherhood movement would seek the imposition of Islamic law in Egypt is now sending shock waves through the Coptic community. Apart from the Christians, Egypt's religious minority population is down to about 2,000 Baha'is, 1,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, and 125 Jews.

Non-Muslim communities collectively have diminished to no more than two percent of Iran's 71 million people. Iran's largest non-Muslim minority community is the Baha'i, founded in Shiraz, in southeastern Iran, and severely repressed as a heresy. Baha'is in Iran number about 300,000. Iran also counts about 300,000 Christians of a variety of denominations, a number that is rapidly dwindling under an active policy of religious repression by the revolutionary Shi'a government. Zoroastrians, based on the plains of Iran since their religion's founding somewhere between 1800 and 1500 BC by the devotional poet Zarathustra, have experienced a steady decline and are estimated to number now between 45,000 and 90,000. Iran is home to 25,000-30,000 remaining Jews. About 5,000 to 10,000 Mandaeans also live in Iran and are, according to this report, "facing intensifying harassment and repression."

The Persian Gulf region and northern Africa have few remaining Christian churches, synagogues or any other non-Muslim houses of worship. Ancient, indigenous churches have all but disappeared. Native Christians – mostly evangelicals, probably numbering in the thousands – worship largely in secret. Saudi Arabia, the most religiously repressive in this group, has only one publicly known native Christian, an oft-imprisoned and extremely courageous young man. Foreign workers, including over a million Christians and a million or two Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths, now living in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, are denied rights of nationality and, in the former, even the right to public worship. The more open Morocco is now home to the largest Jewish community in the Arab Middle East, numbering no more than 6,000. Without due process, Morocco summarily deported scores of foreign Christian educators and social workers last spring.

In Turkey, the site of Constantinople, which was the center of Byzantine Christianity from the 4th to the 15th century, only some 90,000 Christians remain, less than 0.2 percent of the population. As this report makes clear, they are now being suffocated by a web of state regulations that cripple their ability to pass on the faith to the next generation, and make it difficult even to carry out worship services. Turkey also has about 23,000 Jews, 10,000 Baha'is, 5,000 Yezidis, and 3,300 Jehovah's Witnesses.

Turkey has never held a transparent investigation into charges of genocide against its Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek populations in the early part of the 20th century and makes it a crime of "insult" even to raise this issue. Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was convicted for such "insult," and he was murdered in 2007; the murder trial continues to drag on, raising a legitimate concern that justice may be denied.

This report is country-specific and its recommendations are appropriately country-specific. It is important, however, to recognize this overall regional pattern of ever-shrinking religious diversity that has important implications for American policy.