



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: EGYPT

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### USCIRF's Mission

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Egypt

### Introduction

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Egypt have continued their recent trajectory of improvement in some areas and ongoing and systemic challenges in others. The administration of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has named religious tolerance as a goal for society and maintained its five-year plan to implement the [National Human Rights Strategy](#). The Ministry of Education has made some progress in its ongoing revisions to public school textbooks by removing certain material damaging to religious minorities from some grade levels' materials. President El-Sisi has invited some religious minority leaders and groups to participate in drafting the personal status law and to join the government and civil society members in a [National Dialogue](#).

Despite these initiatives, systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief remain in place in Egypt, including actively enforced blasphemy laws, non-recognition of certain religious communities, and severe restrictions on religious expression. State security and the courts continue to arbitrarily detain and prosecute religious freedom advocates and members of religious minorities. Further, some [government initiatives](#) that appear to address specific religious minorities' concerns have not significantly advanced religious freedom for Egyptians of all religious backgrounds.

This country update assesses the current state of religious freedom in Egypt, incorporating the observations of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) May 2023 visit to the country. During the visit, USCIRF met with Government of Egypt officials, clergy from a variety of religious backgrounds, former religious prisoners of conscience, and members of civil society. These conversations highlighted positive steps the Egyptian government continues to take, especially with respect to some religious minorities. At the same time, the visit reinforced USCIRF's existing concerns over ongoing impediments to Egyptians' freedom of religion or belief as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments. As noted in its [2023 annual report](#), USCIRF maintains its recommendations that the U.S. government continue to raise these concerns with Egyptian interlocutors and seek greater protection of freedom of religion or belief.



## Religious Freedom Conditions

In 2018, President El-Sisi declared preserving religious and cultural heritage sites a national priority as part of an effort to attract tourism and showcase Egyptian national identity. In December 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a one-year implementation report of the National Strategy for Human Rights. The strategy, released in September 2021, calls on relevant ministries and authorities to continue carrying out maintenance and restoration of religious monuments, specifically for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities. The implementation report includes steps the government has taken since the strategy's publication to advance religious pluralism and freedom, which include maintaining, renovating, or restoring 1,277 mosques and 2,401 churches and opening seven of 14 sites along the Holy Family Trail.

The Egyptian government has invested resources and money into the restoration of historic Jewish sites as well. In October 2022, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities [announced](#) plans to reopen the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, a historic Jewish house of worship that now functions as a museum and tourist attraction. The Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria [reopened](#) in 2020 following a three-year restoration period. This coincided with a decision by the Ministry of Antiquities to register hundreds of Jewish artifacts from the country's synagogues, a process that began in 2016.

Despite these restorations, however, most of the renovated sites no longer serve active religious communities. While the government has invested money

in preserving old houses of worship, it has not taken steps to materially advance the current religious freedom of faith communities themselves.

## Christians

The Egyptian government maintains a relationship with the Coptic Orthodox Church, the largest Christian denomination in Egypt, and with other Christian institutions and leaders. In meetings with USCIRF, Christian leaders praised the in-progress draft personal status law for Christians as well as the government's continued recognition of some existing buildings as churches via Law 80 of 2016. Officials continue to work through the backlog of church legalization applications dating to 2017, shortly after the law's passage, with the most recent batch of 374 buildings [approved](#) in June 2023 for recognition as churches. Leaders also expressed appreciation for government support in constructing new churches large enough to accommodate local communities and built to sufficient safety standards to mitigate the risk of fires, which have broken out in church buildings in recent years.

However, while recently constructed churches demonstrate better structural integrity and safer capacity, their locations in newly designed, less-populated cities and neighborhoods keep many Christians from benefiting from them. Their construction has not alleviated the problems that congregations in many other parts of Egypt face, including inadequate infrastructure and an inability to obtain government approval for critically needed repairs. Such communities also face the ever-present specter of mob riots and assaults by

members of neighboring Muslim-majority communities who object to church renovation or registration. The Church of the Virgin and St. Samuel in al-Beheira governorate has experienced all these *challenges* in recent months. It is overflowing in capacity as the sole church serving Copts in 17 villages, and during long-awaited roof repairs, it was attacked by intolerant villagers who indicated they do not want a church in the village. Consequently, local government agencies denied the church continued restoration work.

Although church leaders maintain good relations with government officials, Copts' protection remains heavily dependent on personal relationships between the church and the government, without the benefit of an institutionalized policy. While the government supports church building efforts, local Coptic community leaders still feel pressure to engage in sensitive negotiations with local Muslim leaders to avoid conflict as well as vandalism of churches. Harassment of Christians also continues in Egypt, and state security has reportedly not responded consistently on behalf of the victim in such cases.

Indeed, Coptic victims of identity-based crimes have been further disenfranchised through some communities' continued reliance on so-called "*reconciliation councils*," extra-judicial community tribunals led by local leaders who are often of the same religious background as the alleged perpetrators of crimes against Copts. In meetings with USCIRF, government officials and senior religious officials expressed support for using formal judicial channels and reported that they encourage community members to pursue official legal avenues. Despite this, some cases have involved police or other authorities' pressure on Coptic victims to agree to adjudication by reconciliation council. In small villages, pressure on individuals to pursue reconciliation can be great, as failing to do so can invite unwanted attention from security officials in the area. Activists also reported to USCIRF that participants in such councils are sometimes made to commit collateral they cannot afford, a vulnerability which security services then leverage to pressure them into accepting an agreement.

### **Jews**

In 2023, the government continued to provide security to the Egyptian-born Jewish population—now believed to number fewer than ten people—including a regular presence at synagogues and as needed for local events. No rabbis remain in the country to perform

regular religious services. In April, the government provided a security escort for visiting Jewish students walking through the streets of Cairo, avoiding public transportation in accordance with Shabbat ritual observance. Jewish leaders continued to inquire about the pace of archiving and digitizing historical community records that have been in the government's possession since 2016. Government officials have repeatedly denied access to Jewish organizations requesting copies of the archives.

A May *report* from the textbook monitoring NGO IMPACT-SE notes a gradual improvement in removing antisemitic content from the state school curriculum up to the 5th grade, although textbooks in higher grades continue to present harmful attitudes toward Jews and lack general history about Jews and Jewish life in Egypt. The remaining Jewish population reportedly was not consulted about these textbook changes. While in January, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo *partnered* with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to host the country's second consecutive Holocaust Remembrance Day Commemoration, *the Holocaust is still not taught* in the Egyptian curriculum. Attendees included representatives from the remaining local Jewish population, universities, and research organizations as well as foreign dignitaries.

### **Baha'is**

Egypt's government continues to deny Baha'is recognition and restricts the community's freedom of religion or belief. Non-Baha'is who speak on the community's behalf face pressure from state security to stop, and Baha'is themselves have also been denied the ability to participate in Egypt's National Dialogue that began in May 2023. Because there is no personal status law for Baha'is in Egypt, community members cannot get married. Couples have attempted to remedy this issue within the confines of existing laws by getting married abroad and asking Egypt's government to recognize these foreign-obtained civil marriages. While Egypt's Ministry of Interior originally accepted these marriages in certain cases, it has done so inconsistently, denying marital status to some applicants. In May 2023 the Ministry countersued a Baha'i person who pursued this track on the grounds the individual did not disclose his or her Baha'i identity while asking for this marriage recognition. As the deadline for potential objections to the ruling in favor of this recognition has passed, the Ministry is appealing broadly to "general order" as the basis for its claim.

Baha'is also face ongoing difficulty obtaining land for cemeteries. After an Alexandria court denied the community land for a cemetery, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the decision in 2022 based on the group's lack of recognition by the state as a religion. In other areas (including Port Said), courts have responded to requests to buy cemetery land by saying no land was available. In meetings with USCIRF in May 2023, a high-ranking official in the Alexandria Governorate offered to assist the community and requested criteria for the land necessary to establish a cemetery.

Baha'is have reported concerns their applications to private schools are being rejected on the basis of their faith, and many are afraid to report they are Baha'i on university applications. In meetings with USCIRF, Ministry of Education officials noted that while they "respect everyone," the small number of religious minorities makes offering additional religious education options unnecessary and pointed out students are not required to attend the religious lesson.

### Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses lack constitutional recognition in Egypt and face obstacles to the full enjoyment of social and political life. A 1960 government ban on the group remains in effect. Today approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses live in Cairo, Alexandria, and Minya. Without any legal instrument for recognition or personal status laws, Jehovah's Witnesses face barriers to attaining building permits for houses of worship. The government has continued to deny their requests to hold public religious gatherings. Although the government designates Jehovah's Witnesses as "Christian" on identity cards, a presidential decree bans any religious activity, including the export or printing of worship texts or use of online religious materials produced by Jehovah's Witnesses. Some community members worship privately but fear targeting by state authorities for any display of their faith. Other community members have been monitored by government security at their private homes and subject to hours-long questioning in airports without justification. Additionally, leaders report the proliferation of defamatory messaging coming from some Coptic Orthodox Church leaders in the last year which casts Jehovah's Witnesses as "not religious, imposters, and satanic."

## Government Policy

Many of the restrictions on freedom of religion or belief that religious minorities face in Egypt are rooted in laws, court rulings, and other systemic Egyptian government policies. While Egypt's government authorities have been willing to engage in discussions of reform on certain aspects of these policies, their ongoing enforcement remains a concerning restriction on religious freedom for Egyptians.

### National Identity Cards

Egypt's national identity cards are crucial for civic participation in the country, and numerous governmental and non-governmental institutions request them for formal transactions (e.g., booking hotel rooms). Egypt's government allows ID holders to list one of three recognized religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) or—partly in response to past Baha'i advocacy efforts—a "dash" on the religion line of the card. While the dash allows members of non-recognized faiths to avoid falsely claiming membership in a different religion, both this option and the listing of religion on ID cards more broadly create restrictions on freedom of religion or belief for Egyptians. For example, Baha'is who use a dash on their ID cards have faced questioning by officials to whom they show the cards. Some Baha'is report that such conditions have improved in recent years. However, the existence of the religion listing on ID cards continues to leave not only Bahai's but all religious minorities vulnerable to exposure and potential discrimination when presenting their card.

### Personal Status and Adoption Laws

Following decades of advocacy and negotiations, an Egyptian judicial committee completed a draft personal status law for Christians in 2022. The Coptic Orthodox Church, along with representatives from other Coptic churches, including Catholic, Evangelical, and Anglican, has contributed to ongoing drafting efforts for laws related to Christian marriage, divorce, child custody—though *not adoption*—and inheritance. In mid-2023—reportedly in part due to the government's parallel work on an *Islamic personal status law* revision—Egypt's Cabinet had not yet reviewed and approved the law for voting by parliament and potential passage into law. In the meantime, Christians in Egypt remain potentially—and sometimes inconsistently—subject to Muslim personal status laws, which often differ significantly from those of Christian religious traditions. Christian leaders

representing the five major denominations in Egypt have stated their support for the draft Christian personal status law. Egyptian government officials with whom USCIRF met noted little tangible progress in the actual passage of the law, though they expressed enthusiasm about its potential passage as evidence of greater religious tolerance in Egypt. Some activists with whom USCIRF met also raised concerns that the personal status law would concentrate religious power in Christian religious establishments that are within the influence of the Egyptian state, restricting further the individual freedom of religion or belief of members of these communities.

One example of the importance of personal status and related laws is the case of the child named Shenouda. A married Christian couple began raising the child in 2018 after he was discovered as a baby on the grounds of a Coptic Orthodox church. The couple gave him the Coptic name “Shenouda,” applying for a birth certificate and raising him as a Christian for the first four years of his life. After an inheritance-related claim publicized the child’s origins, the Ministry of Social Solidarity in early 2022 removed Shenouda from his foster parents, placed him in an orphanage, changed his name to reflect Muslim naming conventions, and registered his religion as “Islam” consistent with Egyptian practices on assigning religion to children of unknown parentage. Egyptian law does not recognize adoption, referencing Islamic religious interpretations, but orphans can be raised by foster parents of the same religion pursuant to a 2010 law. Some scholars have also argued adoption bans need not apply to Egyptians of other faiths. In December 2022, Egypt’s National Council on Human Rights called for the government to reunite Shenouda with his foster parents. In March 2023, prosecutors issued an order for Shenouda to be temporarily *returned* to the parents, citing an edict from Egypt’s Grand Mufti and a fatwa from the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. Religious freedom advocates have urged Egyptian officials to grant the Christian couple the right to adoption and allow the child legal registration under the couple’s family name.

### **Educational Curriculum Reforms**

Egypt has continued to make progress on integrating religious tolerance as a value into its educational curriculum, in alignment with the goals outlined in the National Strategy for Human Rights. However, the rolling, multiple-year plan for textbook reforms to remove material harmful to religious minorities has resulted in the continued use of inflammatory material

in textbooks for grades or subjects which have not yet undergone revision. Further, public schools offer only Muslim and Christian education, forcing students who do not ascribe to these religions to either attend classes on a religion of which they are not a member or, in some cases, to skip instruction altogether and expose themselves as a religious minority. Ministry of Education officials suggested that members of certain religious communities could turn to foreign embassies for religious education in their own traditions.

### **Religious Prisoners of Conscience**

The Egyptian criminal justice system continues to pose some of the most potent challenges to religious freedom in Egypt. The government released hundreds of prisoners ahead of the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27) climate summit, which it hosted in November 2022. However, officials continue to detain potentially tens of thousands of political prisoners, including scores of individuals detained on the basis of religion or belief. Those accused of crimes often face egregious violations of due process, such as lack of access to a lawyer, denial of habeas corpus, detention without charges, unjust detention in solitary confinement, serial postponement of judicial hearings, and unjust travel bans following their release. Some, though not all, of these denials have targeted religious minorities.

Egypt maintains provision 98(f) in its penal code, which criminalizes “insulting [the three] heavenly religions,” also known as “contempt for religion” (i.e., blasphemy). The government has not indicated the existence of significant political will to repeal or revise this law or to end the active pursuit of potential blasphemy cases. Meanwhile, state security, prosecutors, and courts have continued investigation, arrest, detention, prosecution and, in some cases, conviction and sentencing on the basis of alleged breaches of the blasphemy law. For example, in March 2023, the Cairo Criminal Court renewed the detention of [Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed Khalifa](#) for alleged breach of law 98(f). Other charges the government commonly uses—often in combination with the blasphemy statute—to suppress religious identity or dissent include “spreading false news [against Egypt]” and, among several counterterrorism provisions, “joining a terrorist group.” In 2023, courts invoked both counterterrorism and blasphemy laws to renew the detention of [Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges](#), who had created a Facebook group to assist people wishing to convert to Christianity, and [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#), a Yemeni



asylum-seeker whose apparent basis for detention—publicizing his conversion to Christianity—also puts him at risk if deported to the country from which he originally sought refuge.

Egypt has also continued to detain and charge individuals under the [Egyptian cybercrimes law](#) (175/2018). Article 25 of the law forbids the use of technology to “infringe on any family principles or values in Egyptian society.” The law contains several broad provisions that the government can use to censor the expression of religious beliefs, targeting both non-Muslim and Muslim religious minorities. It also restricts religious expression for people of Sunni Muslim backgrounds whose beliefs differ from state-sanctioned interpretations, including members of Egypt’s LGBTQI+ and atheist communities. The government has threatened legal experts attempting to study the law to understand its limitations.

Egypt’s judiciary also continues to impose travel bans in ways that are arbitrary and not subject to oversight. Travel bans restrict not only freedom of movement but also the freedom to express religious beliefs, as those under such bans cannot evade the surveillance of the state or speak freely at international conferences. At least two Christian former prisoners remained under a travel ban despite having completed their prison sentences. [Patrick Zaki](#), a graduate student at the University of Bologna in Italy, was arrested in 2020 after publishing an article with personal reflections on religious discrimination against Copts in Egypt. Authorities released him after 22 months of detention but, for the next 1.5 years, placed him under an official travel ban and forced him to endure serial postponement of a judicial ruling in his case. When the Egyptian government refused to permit Zaki’s travel to Italy to defend his thesis, the University heard his defense and granted his degree in July 2023 via [video link](#). On July 18, 2023, an emergency state security court [sentenced](#) Zaki to three years in prison and officials arrested him in court to return him to prison. The sentencing prompted an outpouring of international concern for Zaki’s status, including USCIRF’s [statement](#) at a congressional hearing on religious freedom. The following day, President El-Sisi pardoned Zaki and another high-profile prisoner of conscience. On July 20, 2023, prison officials released

Zaki, after which he traveled to Italy. [Ramy Kamel](#) is a Coptic activist and founder of the Maspero Youth Foundation who was arrested in 2019. Prior to his January 2022 release, a prosecutor asked Kamel to sign a document with the effect of banning him from travel for one year. However, other authorities later told him the ban extends beyond the one year specified.

Other former religious prisoners of conscience suffer the prolonged uncertainty of unofficial travel bans. [Reda Abdel Rahman](#), a former blogger and well-known member of the Muslim Qur’anist community, has endured multiple arrests over several years. Arrested in August of 2020, he was charged—without evidence—of building a cell of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and, after over 1.5 years of pretrial detention, released from prison in February 2022. Despite a confirmation from Egypt’s Public Security that there is no formal travel ban against Abdel Rahman, state security officials have twice prevented him from exercising his right to travel outside of Egypt, intercepting him in May 2022 and March 2023. He has also been unable, for security reasons, to speak with members of his family living in the United States.

## Conclusion

Egypt continues to exhibit systematic and ongoing obstacles to genuine freedom of religion or belief. As such, USCIRF maintains its recommendation that the U.S. Department of State place Egypt on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government should actively leverage its robust bilateral relationship with Egypt to encourage the Egyptian government to take additional steps—especially those affecting legal frameworks and judicial processes—toward ensuring religious freedom. As a country that has demonstrated an interest in making improvements, Egypt is well-positioned to go beyond cosmetic gestures toward “religious tolerance” and make systemic changes to its laws and criminal justice system that significantly advance religious freedom for all Egyptians—an important prospect, especially at present, as the Egyptian government and people face economic, climate, and other ongoing challenges.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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