



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: EGYPT

February 2025

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

By Hilary Miller, Policy Analyst

## State Restrictions on Religious Freedom in Egypt

### Introduction

While Egypt's government continues to support initiatives that selectively promote religious diversity and tolerance, it continues to systematically restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by enforcing laws, policies, and judicial decisions that repress non-Muslim and Muslim religious minority communities. Such FoRB violations affect Coptic Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Qur'anists, as well as nonbelievers. In January 2025, the United Nations (UN) working group evaluating Egypt for its Universal Period Review (UPR) *expressed* concern that these religious and belief communities continue to face "varying forms of discrimination, including restrictions on the building and operation of places of worship and burial sites, restrictions on the public practice of their faith, including prosecution under blasphemy laws, and acts of violence and sectarian attacks carried out with impunity, including by armed groups."

Egypt's government is restricting FoRB in a context of immense political pressure. It is navigating the impacts of the existing conflict in Gaza that began with the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, including the absorption of *approximately* 100,000 Palestinian refugees, managing the flow of humanitarian assistance through the Rafah Crossing, protecting its national security in the Sinai, and serving as an intermediary for ceasefire negotiations. Furthermore, since the armed conflict erupted in Sudan in April 2023, the Egyptian government has been managing an influx of more than *1.2 million* Sudanese refugees. Collectively, these dynamics place additional stresses on FoRB in a country already governed by laws and policies that systematically restrict religious freedom. This country update assesses the current state of religious freedom in Egypt, considering how this fraught landscape affects the Egyptian government's efforts to protect FoRB for all.

### Background

Egypt's population is approximately *111.2 million*, an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a, Qur'anist, and other non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than one percent. Article 2 of Egypt's *constitution* specifies Islam as the official country religion and the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 provides for "absolute" freedom of belief, only followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—the three "heavenly religions"—have formal legal status to publicly practice religion and build houses of worship.



Since the 1960s, the government has continued to deny legal recognition to Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, subjecting them and other unrecognized religious minorities to bureaucratic challenges with severe impacts on religious, social, and civil aspects of daily life. These include difficulties with civil procedures related to marriage licenses and cemetery allotments. Neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit renunciation of Islam. However, the government has targeted, harassed, and issued harsh penalties, including long sentences and travel bans, against individuals who have publicly rejected the state's interpretation of Islam and purportedly violated laws that severely limit religious freedom in Egypt.

## Laws Restricting Freedom of Religion or Belief

### Criminalization of Blasphemy

Provision 98(f) of the Egyptian [Penal Code](#) criminalizes "insulting [the three] heavenly religions" as "contempt for religion" (i.e., [blasphemy](#)). The government has not exhibited significant political will to repeal or revise this law or end the active prosecution of blasphemy cases. State security, judicial authorities, and the courts have continued to investigate, arrest, detain, prosecute, and in some cases convict and sentence individuals for alleged breaches of the blasphemy law. In January 2024, a Nozha court sentenced Egyptian composer [Ahmed Hegazy](#) to six months in prison for "contempt of religion" after he appeared in a video reciting verses of the Qur'an to a tune authorities deemed inappropriate. In March, Egypt's

Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation rejected a petition of appeal submitted by [Marco Girgis](#). Girgis is a Christian who in 2022 was sentenced to five years in prison for violations under Article 98(f) of the penal code, specifically for "contempt of Islam." In 2024, [Ahmed Mohamed](#) remained in detention after an Egyptian court invoked the blasphemy provision of the criminal code for reportedly desecrating religious symbols and violating of the "heavenly" religions.

The government commonly uses other charges in combination with the blasphemy statute to suppress religious identity or dissent. These charges include "spreading false news [against Egypt]" as well as "joining a terrorist group" and similar counterterrorism provisions. In April 2024, [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#), who was held in pre-trial detention under counterterrorism and blasphemy charges for his involvement with a Facebook group for people wishing to convert to Christianity, was denied medical treatment by authorities at the 10th Ramadan Prison after reporting chest pains. In May, another prisoner reported Abdo for copying Bible verses on scraps of paper. As punishment, Egyptian prison authorities placed him in solitary confinement, denied his family from attending routine monthly visits, and prevented Abdo from showering or changing his clothes for a full week. In August, Abdo began a hunger strike in protest of his prolonged arbitrary detention. In January 2025, Egyptian authorities released Abdo, as well as Christian activist [Nour Gerges](#) who was sentenced on blasphemy charges for promoting his faith online. However, Egyptian judicial authorities did not formally drop the charges against them.

## Discriminatory Requirements for Building and Repairing Churches

In 2024, a Cabinet-appointed committee [approved](#) 480 church and service building permits pursuant to the [Church Construction Law](#), bringing the total number of permits to 3,453 since the law's adoption in 2016. The law has created a legal pathway for Christian worship sites to achieve status as churches. However, the law reinforces an inherently discriminatory system with separate requirements for Christians—including the submission of paperwork to state-approved administrative committees and approval of physical structures commensurate with the number of worshippers in a given community—and also no application eligibility for all other religious minorities regarding houses of worship. As of December 2024, the government has yet to act on roughly 2,300 legalization requests for churches and Christian facilities. In May 2024, church leaders in the Cairo suburb of Nasr City [confronted](#) the Ministry of Defense after the government authorized construction for a residential compound on property previously granted permits for the church's expansion. After campaigning on their legal rights to the land, community leaders prevailed in stalling the residential construction. However, the incident underscored the systemic problem of the Egyptian government renegeing on obligations under the Church Construction Law to prioritize urban planning at the expense of Egypt's Christian community. In June 2024, the Ministry of Endowments [announced](#) plans to invest 18.6 billion Egyptian pounds (\$366,000) into the renovation, maintenance, and development of more than 12,000 mosques throughout the country. As of December 2024, the Ministry has [reopened](#) 34 new mosques which had undergone either reconstruction or renovation as part of the government initiative. These plans underscore the government's selective favorable treatment of the Muslim majority given the prioritization of mosque construction over the thousands of pending requests for Christian facilities. Also, while recently constructed churches that have been approved by Law 80 have better structural integrity and safer capacity requirements, they are located in newly created, less-populated cities and neighborhoods that are inaccessible to many Christian worshippers. Their construction has not alleviated the problems that congregations in other parts of Egypt face, particularly in rural Upper Egypt. These problems include inadequate infrastructure and an inability to obtain government approval for needed repairs.

## Restricting FoRB through Cybercrime Law

Egypt continues to detain and charge individuals under the [Egyptian cybercrime 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 Muslim religious minorities and non-Muslims. For example, a November 2023 [ruling](#) on the applicability of the cybercrime law by the Alexandria Economic Court invoked specific Qur'anic verses condemning same-sex relations as the basis for its decision. In February 2024, an Egyptian court [sentenced](#) Kyrillos Nashed, an assistant professor of engineering at Menoufia University, to six months in prison with a fine of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2,050) for a Facebook post allegedly violating “family principles and values” pursuant to the cybercrime law. Nashed was also charged with “contempt of religion” after a conversation about Christianity reportedly escalated between him and a bishop, who then reported Nashed to authorities for promoting extremist ideas online.

## Government Policies Affecting Religious Minorities

### Personal Status and Family Law

Individuals in Egypt are subject to different sets of personal status laws regarding such matters as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance depending upon their official religious designation. This has had profound impacts on non-Muslim religious minority communities and nonreligious individuals. Egyptian interpretations of Shari'a inform the current personal status laws applicable to the Muslim majority. Although in recent years, Jews and Christians—including Copts of any denomination—may ostensibly adhere to their own personal status laws, courts have not always been consistent in appropriately applying these laws. The Egyptian government's personal status policy has posed particular restrictions on Coptic women. Instead of applying Christian inheritance standards that make no distinction between male and female potential heirs, some courts have instead applied Shari'a-based personal status laws, which has denied Coptic women of inheritance shares equal to those of their brothers or other male relatives.

The government has made some positive steps regarding its personal status policy, including the passage of a 2017 law guaranteeing the right for women to receive

their legal inheritance and a 2019 Court of Appeals decision in favor of a Coptic Orthodox female plaintiff. However, personal status law reform and consistent legal enforcement of these laws remain crucial areas of improvement. In 2023, President el-Sisi's administration solicited draft personal status laws from representatives of Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical, Catholic, and Anglican churches. Activists [commended](#) government authorities for working in concert with Christian leaders throughout 2024 to draft a law with legal protections compatible with religious practice for marriage, child custody, divorce, and inheritance. As of January 2025, the new draft is awaiting approval from the House of Representatives, where a special committee will review it before the law is put to a vote in the legislature. Despite this progress, the government did not solicit drafts from any other non-Muslim minority community other than Christians. The UPR of Egypt in January 2025 specifically [addressed](#) the limitations of the country's current personal status law and recommended that the government accelerate the review process.

### National Identity Cards

The Ministry of Interior issues national identity cards for citizens that include their official religious designations. Designation options are limited to "Muslim," "Christian," or "Jewish." Although the government designates Jehovah's Witnesses as "Christian" on identity cards, a presidential decree bans their religious activities. Since a 2009 court order, Baha'is and other citizens belonging to unrecognized religious groups, including nonreligious individuals, may have their religious affiliation denoted by a dash ("-") on national identity cards. In 2024, some [Coptic athletes](#) have reportedly been eliminated from continuing on professionally and signing with an athletic team because of the faith listed on their identity card.

### Intolerant Religious Content in Textbooks

The Egyptian education system in 2018 began a year-by-year reform of its curriculum, starting with the first grade and proceeding a grade each year. A November 2023 [report](#) from the textbook monitoring NGO IMPACT-SE examined curriculum from al-Azhar, the country's preeminent Sunni institution, which administers a government-sanctioned K-12 school system with its own textbooks. The report noted that problematic content remains regarding non-Muslim minorities and other vulnerable groups.

These textbooks defame Jews as "treacherous by nature" and enemies of Islam; Christians and others who refuse to convert to Islam as "infidels"; and Baha'is and Ahmadiyya Muslims as "esoteric" sects of Islam. Other passages teach that violence is permitted against those who do not conform with a particular interpretation of religion, raising religious freedom concerns. The al-Azhar materials impose a government-sponsored interpretation of Islam that prescribes death by stoning for adultery and homosexual relations. One textbook on classical Sunni jurisprudence cites religious texts to justify forcing a woman to marry without her consent. A ninth-grade textbook on Maliki jurisprudence further invokes the death penalty for those guilty of blasphemy, framed as "anyone who vilifies the Prophet Muhammad or other prophets, or who denies the holy scriptures." Religious freedom affords individuals and communities the right to follow a different religious interpretation than the one favored by the state or by a majority of a country's population, without persecution. By normalizing violence—and even death—as permissible punishments against those who adhere to a different religious interpretation than the one the textbooks promote, these teachings create a climate that emboldens state and societal actors to egregiously violate religious freedom in this manner.

Most recently, a December 2024 [report](#) on Egypt's general school curriculum notes a gradual improvement in removing intolerant religious content from textbooks up to the sixth grade. The reformed curriculum has made considerable improvements in the portrayal of Jews and Judaism. For the first time, reformed textbooks acknowledge the historic Jewish presence in Egypt. Traditional antisemitic stereotypes generalizing Jews as treacherous, greedy, and disloyal were also removed. Despite these changes, textbooks in higher grades continue to portray intolerant attitudes toward Jews including antisemitic stereotyping of Jews engaged in finance and references to inherent "Jewish hatred toward Muslims." The Holocaust is not included in the Egyptian curriculum. These omissions may constitute government tolerance of public discourse in Egypt that is at times hostile to Jewish communities. Reformed textbooks have also improved the portrayal of Copts, emphasizing their contribution as a community to Egyptian society and history. However, a fifth-grade textbook presents polytheists as "wicked" and as "infidels" who violate the rights of others to cause harm. Finally, a sixth-grade textbook describes public demonstrations for gay rights as "a violation of the natural order in which God created the world... unacceptable by all divine laws."

## Situation of Non-Muslim Minorities

### Jews

Local and international Jewish organizations report that the Jewish population—which in the 1940s at its height numbered over 80,000—had declined to fewer than 10 people residing in Alexandria and Cairo. The government continues to provide security to the small Egyptian-born Jewish population including a regular presence at synagogues and as needed for local events.

The conflict triggered by Hamas's October 7 terrorist attacks on Israel contributed to a rise in anti-Jewish sentiment in Egypt. In January 2024, an Egyptian book depicting antisemitic tropes and promoting ostensible Jewish plans to dominate the world was *displayed* at the state-run Cairo International Book Fair. Furthermore, since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, government officials and the largely *state-run media* have invoked antisemitic tropes and deliberately misrepresented the history of the Holocaust to describe Israel's military campaign in Gaza. In November 2023, an Egyptian member of parliament *called* Israel a "Nazi country." On his personal social media accounts after October 7, the dean of the faculty for Islamic and Arabic studies at the government-linked Al-Azhar University *called* Jews "treacherous," "cursed," and "the descendants of apes and pigs." He cited the "Zionist lobby's control of the West," invoking the antisemitic canard of Jewish political control. Jewish leaders in Egypt report that such statements have increased feelings of insecurity for what little remains of the Jewish community. In May 2024, a Jewish Israeli-Canadian businessman was shot in his car in Alexandria. The assailants *justified* the killing on the false belief the victim was using his business as a cover for gathering intelligence for the Israeli Mossad.

Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have welcomed President el-Sisi's restoration projects for historic Jewish houses of worship. Yet despite these restoration efforts, Jewish leaders remain skeptical as to whether such overtures remain genuine indications of progress on FoRB. In September 2023, no Jewish community members were invited to attend a government event marking the formal *reopening* of Cairo's historic Ben Ezra Synagogue. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture has repeatedly denied requests to meet with local Jewish leaders concerning their ability to access and digitize historical community archives that have remained in the government's possession since 2016.

### Christians

Egypt's Christians account for at least *10 percent* of the population, constituting the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. Most Christians are Copts, with over 90 percent belonging to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church. A minority subscribe to Coptic Evangelical Protestantism, Coptic Catholicism, and some smaller denominations.

Activists *underscore* the disparate treatment between Copts residing in urban areas compared to rural areas, where local authorities often fail to protect communities from attacks, hostile attitudes towards Christians are more pronounced, and communities face greater obstacles to build and repair houses of worship. In 2024, Copts in Minya Province were subject to a spate of violent attacks by Muslim extremists. In April, days ahead of the Coptic Orthodox Church's Holy Week, Christian villages were *attacked* and homes were *burned* while residents were still inside in the village of Al-Kom Al-Ahm after reports that an Evangelical church had obtained a permit to construct a building. While in some cases Egyptian security services moved expeditiously to quell the violence, in other instances observers criticized authorities' slow response that allowed for property damages.

Coptic families have consistently reported local police and other authorities' reluctance or refusal to undertake investigations into young women's disappearances, including potential evidence of abduction or coercion. This refusal denies Coptic women equal protection under the law on account of their gender and religious identity. In January, police were reportedly hostile and dismissive when the family of *Irene Ibrahim Shehata*, a 21-year-old medical student at Asyut National University, reported her disappearance to authorities. In February, electronic records showed that the religion field on Shehata's national identity card had been changed to "Muslim," purportedly against her will. In May, Martina Mamdouh Wadih Saad Abu Hanna, a Coptic Christian young woman, was reportedly kidnapped by a Muslim religious extremist and forcibly converted. Soon after reports of her abduction circulated, she was returned to her family. In August, 20-year-old Coptic woman Karim Aziz was reported missing to police, who allegedly did not open an investigation after her family filed a report.

In July, a military court [sentenced](#) Yusuf Sa'd Hanin, a Coptic Christian conscript, to three years in prison for "blasphemy" against Islam. A military court [charged](#) Hanin with "committing behavior that is harmful to discipline, order, and military requirements" after he exchanged "statements offensive to Islam" in a private conversation via text. Yusuf allegedly made these statements in May while he was on leave and celebrating Easter with his family in Beni Suef governorate. Egyptian security later arrested him from a military camp and reportedly beat him and interrogated him about his Coptic identity, [asking](#) for the names of Christian preachers he follows and for details on his involvement in any Coptic organizations.

Despite the persistence of discrimination against Copts, some conditions have improved. In 2024, representation of Copts in government increased. A Coptic woman was appointed to the new cabinet as minister of local development, a position that oversees local governance across the country. Two Coptic Christians were also appointed as governors of Beheira and Port Said governorates. In January 2025, President el-Sisi [delivered](#) a message of interfaith tolerance and respect at the Coptic Orthodox Nativity Cathedral.

### **Baha'is**

There are between 1,000 and 2,000 Baha'is in Egypt. The Egyptian government's policy on national identity cards continues to present myriad civil and social barriers to members of the Baha'i community. Baha'is remained excluded and not invited to participate in the government's ongoing National Dialogue throughout 2024. Despite having made overtures to various Christian denominations, the Egyptian government did not request draft personal status laws from the Baha'i community to be considered by parliament. Because there is no personal status law for Baha'is in Egypt, community members cannot legally marry in the country. Couples have attempted to remedy this issue within the confines of existing laws by getting married abroad and seeking government approval to recognize foreign-obtained civil marriages. Egypt's Ministry of Interior has inconsistently and arbitrarily accepted some marriages while denying others. Recently proposed amendments to civil status laws from the Ministry of Justice do not address issues faced by religious minorities, including Baha'is.

In April, after the Baha'i community held a routine general meeting to elect new leadership for its governing council, Egyptian security requested names of some community members. In recent years, the transmission of identity cards to state security has amounted to harassment in the workplace of Baha'is, the deportation of foreigners, and arbitrary detention of community members. Throughout 2024, the government repeatedly shut down attempts by the community to organize in public. In August, after a group of Baha'is rented a public venue to hold a community meeting, authorities ordered that the entire event be canceled. In September, authorities closed a Cairo facility that Baha'i members were going to use to run a support program for immigrant children. Furthermore, interlocutors reported that state surveillance of Baha'i individuals and activities, including the monitoring of social media and email accounts as well as personal cell phones, continued in 2024.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses**

There are approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses in Egypt. Jehovah's Witnesses lack constitutional recognition, and the 1960 government ban on the group remains in effect. Without any legal instrument for recognition or personal status laws, Jehovah's Witnesses face barriers to practicing their faith, including 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, which includes the export or printing of worship texts or use of online religious materials. Community leaders have previously reported that they choose to worship privately for fear of targeting by state authorities. Others have been monitored by government security at their private homes and subject to hours-long questioning in airports without justification.

### **Other Religious and Nonreligious Communities**

The Egyptian government continues to place severe prohibitions on the legal status, worship, and free expression of non-Sunni Muslim minorities. The travel ban on [Reda Abdel Rahman](#), a former blogger and well-known member of the Muslim Qur'anist community, has reportedly been lifted. Abdel Rahman has endured multiple arrests over several years on false accusations of ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). After over 1.5 years of pretrial detention, he was released from prison in February 2022. Following Abdel



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Rahman's release, state security officials twice prevented him from exercising his right to travel outside of Egypt and continued to surveil him in-country. In September 2024, Abdel Rahman reportedly went to local security authorities in Zagazig in another attempt to obtain his passport but was told that he should not pursue international travel again.

Nonbelievers, atheists, and other individuals who reject the state's religious interpretations also remain *vulnerable* in Egypt. The government has *tolerated* social stigma and harassment against nonbelievers. Such individuals also have no option to opt out of required Islamic or Christian courses in public schools.

### Conclusion

Egypt continues to impose systematic and ongoing obstacles to freedom of religion or belief on religious minority communities. Existing laws, policies, and judicial decisions target Coptic Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Qur'anists, and nonbelievers and restrict their ability to freely practice their belief as described in Egypt's constitution.

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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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